Towards a celebratory cultural imagination in an indifferent time

Ashraf Jamal

To love is to think. 

(Alberto Caeiro)

In 1989 a paper appeared which would rock the mainframe of South African resistance culture. First presented as a series of provocative asides in Stockholm, it would receive its more controversial and sustained airing at an ANC in-house seminar in Lusaka. The author was Albie Sachs, an activist in the – then – banned ANC movement. That Sachs’s paper was first released abroad was not only fitting given the draconian measures within the country to silence all discord and protest, it was doubly fitting given the eccentric nature of its content. Not only was Sachs’s message at odds with the censorship laws of the South African state, it was a message which also challenged the received beliefs and objectives of the ANC movement. From the outset, then, Sachs’s paper emerged as an anomaly that, in its challenging of the received tenets of resistance culture, split open the buried and gnawing question: what is the ANC fighting for? The paper’s very title, ‘Preparing ourselves for freedom,’ suggests the heated and anxious scurrying towards a certain readiness. By asking the gnawing question regarding the ANC’s cultural vision, Sachs wittingly, or unwittingly, revealed the insufficiency, indeed the limit, that dogged the ANC’s understanding of culture’s role in a society on the verge of transformation.

Sachs’s paper and the debates it spawned are collected in a seminal text, *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom*, edited by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (1990). The title for the collection comes from the following passage by Pablo Neruda which serves as its epigraph:

Life transcends all structures, and there are new rules of conduct for the soul. The seed sprouts anywhere; all ideas are exotic; we wait for enormous changes every day; we live through the mutation of human order avidly; spring is rebellious.
In pitting life against structure, in rendering ideas strange, in grasping the mutation of humanity, and in signaling the wellspring of a change which owes more to the mystery of nature than the secular imposition of new orders, Neruda intuits the ineluctability of creativity. It is this intuition that the respondents to Sachs’s paper have either failed to grasp or consciously harnessed to a revisionist or positivist conception of social and cultural change. Sachs is party to this ideological and utilitarian conscription of culture. However, as I will argue, Sachs also transcends the very constraints he sets up. And it is this transcendent dimension to Sachs’s cultural vision, a dimension eloquently invoked by Neruda, which is the core of this essay and the seam of the exploration that follows.

Like Neruda, Sachs defers to the integrity and transcendence of an artwork. Like Neruda, Sachs attempts to harness this distinctly new critical conception of art to the avidity of a society on the verge of discovering what it is and what it must become. As we will discover, this strange fusion of the transcendental and material – which Tony Morphet (1990) describes as a fusion of the liberal/formalist and revisionist settlements – is no ordinary feat. Rather, it is a fusion, or epistemological convergence, which attests to the extraordinary historical moment that marked the transition from oppression to liberation. Twelve years on it is a moment that remains remarkable, and it is for this reason, if this alone, that Sachs’s paper remains an epistemological bridging point in the process of cultural change.

By no means a manifesto or treaty, the paper, rather, is a series of provocations and questions which, at its churning core, challenges all deterministic claims for culture. Therein Sachs broaches the key proposition: what ‘freedom’ may or may not mean when applied to cultural transformation. At the historical moment when Sachs conceives of freedom, freedom remains an idea so portentous, so exotic, that if one were Sachs one could almost taste it. Couched in a language that deftly moderates its challenge with a celebratory air of play, the paper confounded those present at its delivery and generated a marked unease.

In his reflection on the impact of his paper, ‘Afterword: The taste of an avocado pear’ (1990b: 145–8), Sachs remembers the muted outcry which resulted from his rejection of a culture of solidarity: ‘A hundred faces tightened in affrontment. ... The somnambulistic sureness of the occasion had been broken’ (1990b: 145). Here Sachs touches upon a key critique of resistance culture: that it was a culture of sleep-walkers, a culture distorted by a reflexive poverty and a failure to understand that creativity knows no consensus; that for culture in its varied forms to make an impact it needed artists who understood the immanence and wakefulness of being.

Sachs then goes on to reiterate his key plea:

We South Africans fight against real consciousness, apartheid consciousness, we know what we struggle against. It is there for all the world to see. But we don’t know who we ourselves are. What does it mean to be a South African?

(1990b: 146)

This question reveals a critical binary – between the real and the imagined, the reactive and the active – which forms the seam of Sachs’s inquiry into culture.
For Sachs, ‘real consciousness’ supposes a cognitive sphere of contestation. More importantly for Sachs, however, there remains an other sphere that is irreducible to this cognitive and reactive fight for change. For Sachs this other sphere remains a mystery, the root of which is a profound ignorance of who 'we' are: what it means to be a South African. That this question persists today should reinforce the depth of the dilemma that confronted Sachs. Moreover, the persistence of this question – what does it mean to be? – should alert us to a discrepancy between what 'we' appear to be and what 'we' are.

By foregrounding this discrepancy Sachs posted a warning which, in a time consumed by positivism and instrumentality, was not satisfactorily heeded. Disregarded as eccentric, as precious and beside the point, the question would not, however, go away. On the contrary, it would spark the flame of inquiry; coax the unsaid and mysterious. The sphere where this flame would burn most brightly would be within the arts. Sachs intuited this:

The artists, more than anyone, can help us discover ourselves. Culture in the broad sense is our vision of ourselves and our world. This is a huge task facing our writers and dancers and musicians and painters and film-makers. It is something that goes well beyond mobilising people for this or that activity, important though mobilisation might be.

(1990b: 146)

In retrospect one may wonder how any thinking radical could have challenged Sachs’s critique of the instrumental nature of resistance culture. But then one must not forget the stranglehold which the apartheid regime possessed over the imaginations of all those who resisted it. As Sachs would state at the outset of his paper 'Preparing ourselves for freedom,' we remain caught in the 'ghetto' of the apartheid imagination; that, in fact, we have failed to demonstrate a counter-imagination; one not only founded on resistance but which, in its execution and deliverance, could trump the very system one was fighting against and in which one remained trapped.

At its very outset, then, Sachs’s paper signaled not only confusion but a misperception of the perspective, location, and agency of resistance culture. The first proposition that Sachs makes is that for culture to become free it must cede its pathological attachment to the oppressive regime that shaped and constrained its deliverance. Culture, to attain this freedom, needed to be active and not reactive, for while it may be both necessary and worthy, reaction remained the instinct of the slave, of the unfree. The very reactive nature of resistance culture, therefore, ensured that it remained implicated in the very specular and juridical economy that it sought to undo. For Sachs, then, freedom is not reducible to resistance. In ‘Preparing ourselves for freedom’ Sachs provides a number of illustrations to reinforce this fact. Much has been said on this matter. Sachs’s paper and the responses thereto, gathered in Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom, are easily accessible to those who wish to review the list of 'no-no’s which, for Sachs, amounts not only to bad culture but also to a hopelessly limited conception of the agency of culture in social transformation.
What interests me, however, is how Sachs shifts from the limits of resistance culture towards a critical epistemological threshold; one that he intimates rather than foregrounds or develops. This epistemological threshold, this glimmer he calls ‘freedom,’ is, I would argue, the post-dialectical moment in cultural expression. This moment lies in Sachs’s conception of the agency of culture: how, in a non-teleological or non-deterministic way, culture impacts upon and transforms lives. For Sachs this transforming power of culture, in all its forms, achieves a degree of freedom in the instant that it surmounts the inhibiting economy that founds its reactivity and resistancy. To my knowledge this post-dialectical moment in Sachs’s paper has not been addressed. If this is indeed so, it is in part because the very domain of critical and cultural inquiry is still caught in the Manichean bind which Sachs contests at the outset of his paper. If this is so, it is because the very cultural imagination that Sachs gestures towards remains a nascent and virtual dimension in cultural practice today.

If I now insist upon a more keen address, one which pivots upon this unthinkable, playful, and profoundly radical epistemological goad, it is because without it there will be no advance; without it we will remain unfree; without it there can be no culture that could truly call itself free. That the South African National Arts Coalition should, in 1994, conceptualize its Festivals of Laughter in the following manner all the more reinforces the derivative and reactive nature of cultural expression that persists today:

- The Braai-the sacred-cow-monument sculpture exhibition.
- The Not-approved-by-the Publications Board Short Story competition.
- The Completely Politically Incorrect Stand Up Comedy Festival.
- The Riotous Assembly Street Theatre and Dance festival.
- The Anything-but-the-anthem Best Original Song Competition.
- The Oh-shucks-no-subsidy-bucks short film festival.
- The Have-you-slugged-a-politician-today Poster Competition.

(Veit-Wild 1996: 27)

Clearly, cultural expression continues to be stalked by the apartheid imagination. Clearly, the seemingly subversive nature of this list of goads remains caught in the specular and juridical economy that it purportedly resists. If there has been any alteration in the conception of cultural production in South Africa today, then it has been towards an increased ennui and sense of fatality. The ascendance of this ennui and sense of fatality can be measured by the precise degree to which Sachs’s searching question – what it means to be a South African – has been divested of its force. It is only in rare instances that a cultural imaginary which neither pays lip-service to a deep psychic oppression or which has not fallen victim to what I have called a certain ennui and fatalism has emerged.

Culture’s role, for Sachs, was to invite and to trump this rooted sense of oppression and fatalism. Despite the rejection of this invitation, culture persists with its avid and arduous task. As Sachs’s leading question suggests: how can one move forward when one does not know who one is? It is this not knowing
this *resistance to self-knowledge* – which is the root of South Africa’s continued ills.

The abandonment of Sachs’s leading question in the name of positivism and instrumentality is indicative not of an ongoing quest for freedom, but of the derailment of this quest. That freedom in South Africa was largely ceded and bequeathed, rather than seized, all the more foregrounds the diminishment and critical occlusion which marked the process of, and quest for, freedom. Freedom, then, becomes a handout and not a reckoning; a guaranteed idea and not a fraught and avidly awaited actuality. Absent in the transfer of power – a transfer made in the name of freedom – was the inquiry, rooted in the exploration of the imagination, which formed the key to Sachs’s paper. Which is not to say that the imagination does not form an integral part of South Africa’s libidinal economy and cultural imaginary. My view, however, is that the ‘imagination’ and its cognate, ‘freedom,’ have with a stealthy rapidity become normalized givens; simulacral affects rather than immanent and reflexive descriptors for ongoing change. The National Lottery’s slogan – ‘License to Dream’ – is an axiomatic indicator for what I perceive to be an autocratic – top-down – arbitration of social fantasy and need; in this case via a statistically improbable probability. More generally, one finds the recurrence of a libidinal economy defined by the redemptive tropes that Sachs attaches to creativity. Parmalat ‘feed[s] the imagination.’ Castle Lager announces the axis of consumption and pleasure as ‘a living thing, a together thing.’ What is indisputable is that the tropes of liberty and corporate branding have become indissoluble. It is this very branding of freedom and imagination that distinguishes its delimited and targeted economy and currency.

If Sachs’s paper remains pertinent, then, it is because it contains a critical question that no instrumental or opportunistic vision, including Sachs’s own, has successfully been able to suppress. It is a question that pertains as much to the imaginary of nation-hood as it does to the silenced majority who huddle under the name: *South Africa*. The continued relevance of Sachs’s paper, then, lies in its resistance to the traducement and commodification of the liberatory agency of the imagination. Its relevance, furthermore, is not defined by its ability to define what is good or bad art. The very privative and juridical nature of such comparative evaluation is in itself prohibitive and, for Sachs, finally inadmissible. While Sachs may dwell in this comparative sphere his sights are set upon a greater goal that, in leveling a privative evaluative system, potentially unlocks the framing limits affixed to cultural production.

Here, in sentiment and intellectual inclination, Sachs’s paper bears a striking affinity to Václav Havel’s ‘Six asides about culture’ (1986). Therein Havel similarly challenges the overdetermining role of ideology in relation to artistic expression. Indeed, Havel goes so far as to say that it does not matter to what or whom an artist expresses his or her allegiance. Rather, what matters is the work. The assumption here is that it is possible to create works of merit
irrespective of one’s ideological affiliation. Moreover, by overcoming the moral
determinism that all too often dogs the construction and evaluation of a work,
one can potentially release the ethical nature of a particular artwork. The
implicit assumption, here, is that the ethical, unlike the moral, knows no
claimants, no received history, no final and purposive vision. Which is why Havel
and Sachs refute critical judgment as the ruler of taste, and why, in a moment
of profound generosity, Havel, like Sachs, forgoes any definitive appraisal in the
knowledge that the fate of a work cannot be determined in the present
moment:

Who among us would dare to say that he can unerringly distinguish something of
value – even though it may be nascent, unfamiliar, as yet only potential – from
its counterfeit? Who among us can know whether what may seem today to be
marginal graphomania might one day appear to our descendants as the most
substantial thing written in our time? Who among us has the right to deprive
them of that pleasure, no matter how incomprehensible it may seem to us?
(1986: 129)

The remarkable open-mindedness and generosity of Havel’s vision is matched,
albeit residually, in Sachs’s paper. If Sachs fails to sustain this ethical openness,
the limit lies not in the vision but in its circumscription and containment.
However, what I will now develop is what I have called the post-dialectical
moment in Sachs’s vision which, at its core, must, like Havel, conceive of
culture as ‘a sphere whose very nature precludes all prognostication … [for] the
secrets of culture’s future are a reflection of the very secrets of the human
spirit’ (1986: 123–4). Here Havel also echoes Neruda.

If culture can be said to reflect the human spirit, then what is the spirit of
South Africa? This is undoubtedly a great question; a question which Sachs has
broached, which has persistently been neglected or rhetorically contained. In
South Africa, I would suggest, the ‘ghetto’ remains the defining characteristic of
South Africa’s cultural imaginary. The release which Havel, Neruda, and Sachs
call for has not yet occurred. South Africa remains afflicted by what Havel
describes as a ‘Biafra of the spirit’ (1986: 125).

Something akin to the following anxiety forms the impulse for Sachs’s paper.
Havel:

something in me rebels … against the claim that history has condemned us to
the unenviable role of mere unthinking experts in suffering, poor relations of
those in the “free world” who do not have to suffer and have time to think.
(1986: 126)

If Sachs is well aware of the constraints of an equivalent legacy, he, like Havel,
remains compelled to invoke a project – none other than the decolonisation of
the imagination. This project cannot be formalized; must not be named: hence
Havel and Sachs’s critique of criticism’s tendency to asphyxiate. Because it is all
too often shaped by an a priori agenda – even and especially when it appears to
venture without foreknowledge – criticism lays claim to meaning and, thereby,
closes the agency of a given work. As a discipline, then, criticism is inherently
unfree.
In his poem, 'Retreat,' collected in A dead tree full of live birds, Lionel Abrahams similarly challenges this threat and invokes the post-dialectical moment – a moment freed from prognosticatory and retrogressive determinism:

Stay quiet a while.
Let words
rinse clean,
dissolve.

Squat amid potsherds,
scrap your scales.
Let opinion
fall away.

Bear to be numb and dumb,
void of judgments.
Allow a waiting emptiness
of which none knows.

Silent a while
on a margin,
give no name or shape
to expectation.

Let indifferent time,
random flickers of the air,
ungathered dust
bring some instruction.

(1996: 40)

The limits that I affix to criticism also pertain to artistic production. The claim of course is a large one. However, by restricting myself to the domain of critical and cultural production in South Africa, I hope not only to dwell upon the inherent limits therein, but, more importantly, to begin to develop Sachs’s key intuition: that what freedom needs – if it is truly desired, which all too often is not the case – is the inclination and perception evinced in the words of Neruda, Havel, and Abrahams, which, I believe, is key to Sachs’s vision of what culture must be. In the words of each there is a sphere of expression that accepts the unthinkable: that which has not heretofore been thought; that which in its nature resists thought; that which challenges the prohibition of the unnamable. If Sachs, therefore, insists upon the desire to know what it means to be a South African, then it is the insistence upon desire and not a nominal foreclosure that matters: hence Sachs’s deferral to the arts as the surest and most mysterious means through which to unravel the question.

By titling his paper ‘Preparing ourselves for freedom’ Sachs effected the first step towards an as yet unbroached drama: the drama of what change might mean and how it could be achieved. Others, it has been argued, preceded Sachs, among them Lewis Nkosi, Es’kia Mphahlele, Nadine Gordimer, Njabulo Ndebele, and Chris Van Zyl. Frank Meintjies’s paper, ‘Albie Sachs and the art of protest,’ gives credence to this view (1990: 30–5). Here, however, I demur. At a surface level Ndebele and Van Zyl – the subjects of Meintjies’s paper – certainly seem to
reproduce Sachs’s strident call. However, neither tackles the core of Sachs’s paper which is not the fundamentally punitive debate over what makes for a good or a bad resistance culture, but, rather, the freedom latent in the critical instant when this very question is surmounted. Lionel Abrahams eloquently phrases this epistemological threshold when he calls upon ‘indifferent time / random flickers of the air / ungathered dust / [to] bring some instruction.’ Of particular note is the phrase *indifferent time*. Irrespective of the specular and monumental construction of history, irrespective of the ends to which history is put, there is an implacable indifference which time possesses, an indifference which not only mocks one’s vaunted claims upon history but which, in its very indifference, reveals the pathos that dogs the varied though deeply implicated perceptions of what culture is and what it must do. What makes Sachs’s paper remarkable, indeed unique, then, is the courage with which it broaches an intractable pathology and how and to what end it pits its attendant quest for freedom.

The burden of this essay, however, is not reactively defined by what Sachs describes as the pathological ‘ghettoes of the apartheid imagination’ (1990a: 19). Rather, I have chosen to embark upon an exploration of what freedom might mean and how, through the arts, it can be achieved. To undertake such a task I have, necessarily, had to defer to the prevailing Manichean binarism that I know is not easily circumvented. The position I wish to advocate is not transgressive or reactive; it is not one that is fueled by a received – revisionist and positivist – intellectual tradition. Rather, it is one that J.M. Coetzee defines under the sign of allegory. I refer here to the doctor’s perception of Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K* as some one, some thing, that ‘scandalously … outrageously … take[s] up residence in a system without becoming a term in it’ (1983: 228).

In brief, the doctor in Coetzee’s novel strives to decode and encode the enigma of K. However, no system of questions will unlock K. Hence the doctor’s frustration. Hence the perception of K as an elusive trace. Hence the ontological primacy that Coetzee gives to a figure that in his very muteness, his very stubbornness, breaks down the punitive dialectical system of interrogation. In a deceptively whimsical moment the doctor goes on to describe K as a ‘polevaulter,’ then, qualifying the description, the doctor adds: ‘Well, you may not be a polevaulter, Michaels, but you are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees’ (1983: 228). The qualification is double-edged, suggesting renunciation as well as a miraculous withdrawal from a privative hermeneutic deadlock.

*Life and Times of Michael K* remains a unique work in a resistance culture dogged by a specular desire for accountability. That the novel stands out as an exception in an otherwise increasingly fatalistic oeuvre is another point. However, its very existence attests not only to the enabling lacuna within its author’s artistic process, but, more importantly, to K’s non-reactive and post-dialectical stance; a stance which at no point is defined as self-reflexive or auto-intellective since it cannot be known to the one who enacts it, but only to the
one who exists at the interpretive margins. Here Coetzee’s achievement is twofold. First, he marginalizes power in the figure of the doctor. Second, he intimates though never discloses the nature of the force that, in deactivating the authority of hermeneutic power, issues forth a latent, intractable, and ruthlessly enduring otherness. If the doctor defines this position or figuration of alterity as allegorical, this definition, technically, is a non-definition because it attaches itself to nothing. Thoroughly persuasive and theoretically compelling though it may be, the doctor’s definition of K amounts to nothing more than a limit-text, the sum of which is interpretive exhaustion.

The deeper core, the root of the doctor’s failure, is echoed in Abrahams’ words: ‘Silent a while / on a margin, / give no name or shape / to expectation.’ Here Abrahams not only stalls the agency of interpretation, but, more importantly, accounts for the necessity of a silence that is not corrosive and confounding but enabling. It is this silence – which precludes judgment – which the doctor must accept against his will. It is this silence that Sachs perceives as the nature of freedom. By silence, here, I do not merely mean muteness; rather, I am gesturing towards a silence – unexpected, without received shape – that is the ethical depth-charge that moves culture irrespective of the form and language it assumes. Without this silence there is no art. Without this silence any attempt to track the perspective, location, and agency of culture is doomed to record nothing more than the banter: the self-reflexive hall of mirrors that is the sum of commentary.

With these broad propositions before us, let us return to Sachs’s paper and recover its lost or displaced import that, today, remains critical to an appraisal of the fate of cultural production in South Africa. To reiterate, Sachs begins with the disarmingly simple statement: ‘We all know where South Africa is, but we do not yet know what it is.’ From the outset of his paper, then, it is the very sovereignty of nomination that Sachs challenges. For Sachs, the country, in particular its germinal and rhizomatic culture, cannot be fixed in a formulated phrase. Rather, Sachs suggests that the advance of life, the will to change, is not the forced and overdetermined sum of nomination, but a vision and an inclination defined by the adjectival; by a word or phrase that names an attribute, that modifies and describes a noun. It is through such a process of inflection that understanding becomes possible. This, as I have suggested, is the procedure at work in the allegorical construction of K. This procedure, renounced or most certainly challenged by detractors such as Nadine Gordimer as gratuitously evasive, as politically inappropriate, as threatening the authority of revisionism and positivism, the mainstay of resistance culture (1984: 3), is championed by Sachs as the surest inroad into expressing and understanding the mystery of South African culture.

The key word Sachs affixes to the mystery is imagination. ‘The problem,’ Sachs writes, ‘is whether we have sufficient cultural imagination to grasp the rich texture of the free and united South Africa that we have done so much to bring about’ (1990a: 19). From the outset Sachs sketches the challenge that awaits the cultural practitioner. In the very next paragraph, however, Sachs
reveals how the problem and the challenge are endangered. The very word he valorizes – imagination – is repeated and negated by the question: 'Can we say that we have begun to grasp the full dimensions of the new country and new people that is struggling to give birth to itself, or are we still trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination?' (ibid.). Clearly the very agency of imagination is fraught and, potentially, compromised. Caught between the straits of hope and fatality – between a ‘cultural imagination’ and an ‘apartheid imagination’ – Sachs forge ahead. The initial tension recurs, forming a contrapuntal argument:

What are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world?

And then, pell-mell:

There is nothing that the apartheid rulers would like more than to convince us that because apartheid is ugly, the world is ugly. ... It is as though our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture; everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed, nothing is about us and the new consciousness we are developing.

(1990a: 21)

Rhetorically, the contrapuntal movement is persuasive. Sachs, however, has his sights set upon a more transforming and challenging point. Like Njabulo Ndebele, he credits South African music as the apex of the ‘new consciousness’; a consciousness characterized by 'wit and grace and vitality and intimacy.' Whereas the visual and literary arts remain compromised by a 'solemnity [that] is overwhelming' (ibid.); a solemnity he associates with the moral weight of revisionism and positivism that has burdened and disfigured these respective art forms. Returning to music – in particular the music of Abdullah Ibrahim, Jonas Gwanga, Miriam Makeba, and Hugh Masekela – Sachs writes:

Their music conveys genuine confidence because it springs from inside the personality and experience of each of them, from popular tradition and the sounds of contemporary life; we respond to it because it tells us something lovely and vivacious about ourselves, not because the lyrics are about how to win a strike or blow up a petrol dump.

(1990a: 21)

It is at this point that Sachs makes what I have termed an epistemological leap. For what matters most to Sachs is how the best in South African music 'bypasses, overwhelms, ignores apartheid, establishes its own space' (ibid., my emphasis). It is in this transforming and questioning negativity that art legislates its freedom.

For Sachs this transforming moment remains dialectical and not, as I have proposed, a post-dialectical moment. A more probing reading, however, suggests that Sachs wills the greater unthinkable freedom implicit in the post-dialectical thought or act. How so? On the surface Sachs, like Ndebele, counterpoints a purely instrumental and non-dialectical view of culture with one that deepens and synthesizes the contradictions of lived experience in South Africa. If we are to accept Sachs’s position, then the music he valorizes would be
a dialectical highpoint in art. But if this is so then how can one synthesize a contradiction and bypass, overwhelm, and establish an other space? My point is that this is impossible. Either one sustains the dialectic or one breaks it. Implicitly, if not explicitly, Sachs favors the latter when it comes to art. Hence the parallel I make with Václav Havel. Neither activist or thinker can accept any constraints upon art-making and cultural production. Hence Sachs’s ‘challenging proposition … that the Constitutional Guidelines should not be applied to the sphere of culture.’ Rather, ‘culture must make its input to the Guidelines’ (1990a: 23).

Of course, one could rightly say that while Sachs promotes freedom of cultural expression, he also – dialectically – constrains and reintegrates culture’s impact upon and instrumentality within society. In other words, that Sachs hems in the post-dialectical radicality nascent in cultural expression and production. Again, this is not quite the case. Rather, it is the very instrumentality of the Constitutional Guidelines which culture in all its forms must interrogate and surpass. If apartheid ‘has closed our society, stifled its voice, prevented the people from speaking,’ then, all the more, it is the vocation of cultural expression to serve as ‘the harbinger[s] of freedom of conscience, debate and opinion’ (1990a: 24, my emphasis).

From this point onward Sachs harnesses the power of his argument; adumbrates and contains the very diversity and freedom for which he calls. For the purposes of my argument, however, the irruption that I’ve termed the epistemological threshold or post-dialectical moment in Sachs’s thinking has been unleashed. There is, as Sachs well knows, no freedom that does not activate and liberate conscience. Furthermore, freedom of conscience is not quite akin to debate and opinion. If the former seeks to break and surmount the mirror, then the latter accepts a specular and juridical economy. Constrained by this economy, it is of course absurd to expect Sachs to forge the liberatory moment that my own reading courts. However, for the purposes of my argument it remains critical that the reader recognize what Sachs intimates and does not wholly say: that over and above the democratic or pluralistic leveling of cultural differences there remains a cultural agency that surpasses boundaries, as well as their nominal erasure, that can potentially invoke a third space which, in the South African cultural economy has not quite been expressed, let alone sustained.

The argument I venture here, acknowledging the limits Sachs places on the agency of culture while still invoking an as yet unthinkable other space, is addressed in Tony Morphet’s essay ‘Cultural imagination and cultural settlement: Albie Sachs and Njabulo Ndebele’ (1990: 131–44). I will not be focusing on Morphet’s comparative reading of the limits and strengths of the cultural visions of Sachs and Ndebele but, for the purposes of my argument, I will restrict myself to Morphet’s incisive reading of Sachs’s essay. Like Morphet, I am interested in the resurgence and agency of the word ‘imagination’; that is, its tropological import and its relevance to cultural production in South Africa. Like Morphet I have also noted its contradictory usage. Morphet does not dwell upon this
matter. However, he implicitly questions the efficacy and paucity of its usage when he states: ‘the paper has to be content with being suggestive because it lacks the means for being definitive’ (1990: 132).

The question I would ask is: what is the basis for this lack? Is it, as Morphet suggests, because Sachs contradicts himself? Is it because Sachs plays fast and loose with a word – imagination – the generative power of which is not sustained? Or is it because the imagination, when affixed to freedom, cannot possess the means to be definitive? This, of course, is the intuition that also drives the thought of Neruda, Havel, and Coetzee’s conception of the allegorical. My point, then, is that it is the very suggestiveness of Sachs’s usage of the word imagination which gives his paper its rich import; an import which, in the heady year of 1989 when the paper was heatedly discussed in Stockholm, Lusaka, and in the cities and townships of South Africa, was no small feat. Definitiveness, then, is not the raison d’être for the paper’s inception and reception. Rather, it is the very openness of the issues it raises and the redemptive and celebratory force of its appeals that account for the paper’s continued currency.

What, however, makes Morphet’s essay compelling is the historical positioning of the critical moment that gave rise to Sachs’s paper. Morphet locates two key and distinct phases of cultural criticism in South Africa. The first, which he roughly dates between 1950 and the early 1970s, he calls ‘the liberal/formalist period.’ The second period, from the mid-1970s through to 1986, he calls ‘the revisionist period.’ These periods of critical and cultural production that he problematically calls ‘settlements,’ thereby imputing these periods of critical production to be ‘times of stability and dominance,’ Morphet then contrasts to a post-1986 period of ‘rupture and transition’ (1990: 133). For the purposes of his argument, Morphet needs to establish two conflicting – ‘relatively stable, relatively durable’ – movements or settlements. Secondly, and of greater relevance here, he needs to show the contradictory conflation of these movements in the third phase of critical and cultural production, a phase he represents through the writings of Sachs and Ndebele.

Before arriving at the epistemologically confusing conflation of these two movements in the writing of Sachs – a conflation which I perceive as enabling rather than problematic – let’s turn to Morphet’s first ‘liberal/formalist settlement.’ Its critical raison d’être, according to Morphet, is ‘the autonomy of the text’ (1990: 134). Within a liberal/formalist paradigm an ‘art work was self-constitutive and self-enclosed’ (ibid.). Its core doctrine is best expressed in Archibald Macleish’s well-known aphorism: ‘A poem should be; not mean’ (ibid.). The watchwords here, words that in today’s critical climate have all too glibly been dismissed, are autonomy and self-enclosure. Purportedly inherited from a Euro-American context, the liberal/formalist movement is said to advocate that ‘works emerged not from individuals or a class or a place or a time but from a hypothesised universal, transcendental, mind’ (1990: 135). It has been claimed – by Morphet among others – that once this hypothesis was uncovered, its hidden transcendent point of closure routed out, the provenance
of this movement 'began to break up' (ibid.). According to Morphet, this break-up went hand in hand with the emergence of the 'revisionist' movement which, in turn, sought precisely to relocate the 'text' in the contexts of individual/class/spatial/temporal productivities and agencies.

Movements of course are commonly defined in and through a series of critical negations and advances. It is in and through these systemic negations that we have come to understand the meaning of history. For the purposes of critical productivity it is useful to advance these systemic negations to make sense of change. However, given the contradictory conflation of these movements in the writings of Sachs and Ndebele, surely we should be alerted to the fact that these movements cannot be as easily parsed and spliced as Morphet would have us believe? In other words, are these movements not also coexistent; doppelgängers in an ongoing debate regarding the nature of the production and reception of a given text? And is this not, precisely, Sachs's point?

Reconsider Macleish’s aphorism: ‘A poem should be; not mean.’ Is this not the core doctrine of Pablo Neruda and Lionel Abrahams? Indeed, is this not also the core doctrine of Life and Times of Michael K? My assumption, then, is as follows: any attempt, no matter how compelling, which forcefully distinguishes the so-called liberal/formalist and the revisionist periods in critical inquiry does a profound injustice to the nature of cultural production. The damage, of course, has already been done. It is as a consequence of this damage – this parsing and splicing of critical and creative productivity – that we have inherited a mutant critical discourse and industry which, in giving up the ghost of being so vital to Macleish, Neruda, Abrahams, Havel, Coetzee, and Sachs, has devolved into a refracted and contentious sphere; one which can no longer be named except as an after-effect, the mutant fall-out of a lost tradition – evinced in the portmanteaus of postmodernism or post-colonialism – and which, more problematically than ever, has accepted adjectival insistence not as the constitutive dimension of great art or thought but as the degraded and frustrated limit of contemporary critical inquiry. Hence the current devolution of critical inquiry into a casual and banal relativism in which meaning means everything and nothing.

Given the bleakness of the present critical moment – a moment not unlike that which Morphet defines under the heading 'incorporative irony,' in which disparate elements are incorporated within a synthesis of 'civilised life' (1990: 136) – the challenge remains one in which the freedom of expression is central to cultural inquiry and expression. That Sachs contradicts himself is not at all surprising. Indeed, it would be all the more surprising if Sachs were not to contradict himself given the fraught and conflicting histories that impact upon his vision. What matters, then, is not the contradiction but the aporia Sachs attempts to sustain in and through the relay of contradictions that bend and twist his paper. This aporia I have called the epistemological leap or the post-dialectical moment, or, returning to Macleish, the being and not the meaning of cultural expression. My argument, furthermore, is that critical inquiry need not assume itself to be a limit text that exists on the ironical margins of cultural
expression, all the more so today when the very distinction between critical and artistic expression has, in the Derridean sense, been erased: at once cancelled and rendered visible. It is this realization that critical inquiry and artistic expression coexist and infuse each other that gives Sachs’s paper its continued currency.

Sachs, like Ndebele, knows – in the words of Morphet – that ‘the revisionist period [is] simply a continuation and a reification of the previous formalist settlement. In [Ndebele’s] argument liberalism turns, inevitably, into neo-Marxism or historical materialism, without effectively altering the “epistemological structures of South African oppression”’ (1990: 139). Key, here, is not only the compelling view that the two movements form a continuum, but that both, according to Morphet’s reading, fail to answer the matter of oppression and, by extension, the matter of freedom. Both movements, in other words, remain reflexively closed.

I will not dwell here on the fact that Ndebele fails to unlock this paradigmatic closure. What interests me, rather, is how Sachs attempts to unlock this perceived closure in the name of artistic freedom. Morphet provides an interesting response, which is that:

Sachs’s understanding of the revisionist settlement is both wider and narrower than that shown by Ndebele. Beneath his arguments and observations is a celebratory (rather than redemptive) narrative.

(Morphet 1990: 140)

Morphet goes on to show how Sachs effectively contaminates his cultural vision by affirming the ANC ‘as the fulfillment of the historical process foreshadowed in the revisionist settlement’ (ibid.). I, similarly, have pointed out this key flaw; a flaw which, given Sachs’s political affiliation and location in history, was unavoidable. However, irrespective of this flaw, what matters and will continue to thrive is the celebratory ethos that Sachs affixes to cultural expression. It is this celebratory ethos which Sachs also describes as ‘love’ and ‘joy,’ which I have interpreted as an aporia akin to Roland Barthes’s post-dialectical notion of bliss or jouissance; an affect of being that bypasses the utility and closure of hermeneutic expression. It is this sense of celebration that I take to be the root of Sachs’s notion of the ‘cultural imagination.’ Furthermore, to contradict Morphet, it is also this sense of celebration that is at the root of Macleish’s aphorism. If this is the case, then to what extent is the aesthetic allegiance to, and value of, self-enclosure truly the core of the liberal/formalist movement? Surely the matter was never as simple as it seemed? Indeed, how can one reconcile transcendence and closure in artistic expression? To what extent is form not the inverse but the handmaiden of formlessness? To what extent is meaning not the adjunct or rider of being but its first port of call? Indeed, finally, are these questions at their root not surpassed in Neruda’s words: ‘Life transcends all structures, and there are new / rules of conduct for the soul’?

Closure and openness, form and formlessness, is a thorny and ethically and aesthetically eternal debate. In the context of Sachs’s paper, it is utterly clear
that, despite the fact that, in Morphet’s words, Sachs presents ‘the ascendancy of the ANC as something akin to the fulfillment of history’ (1990: 141), there remains in a paradoxically deeper and more evident sense a belief in artistic expression that precedes and exceeds this teleological claim. How, Morphet compellingly asks, can one resolve ‘the indeterminate contradictions of human experience ... to demonstrate the victory of a determinate ideological position’ (ibid.)? ‘Like Ndebele, Sachs’s account of the cultural imagination remains incoherent,’ says Morphet.

Both founder on the issue of closure. Both appeal to the notion of incorporative irony for the sake of greater range, flexibility, complexity and openness, but neither is able to relinquish the fixed point of closure in the framework of social action to which they have committed themselves.

(1990: 142)

Clearly Morphet is begging for an alternative vision, one that need not contradict itself and, more importantly, frees itself from the pathological grip of the apartheid imagination that compelled its perpetrators as well as its detractors. In the concluding movement of his paper, which he calls a ’third settlement,’ Morphet notes:

The unpicking of the lock (i.e. the opening up of the point of closure in which a correct historical position authorizes cultural practice) is likely to come through the continuing commerce between local and foreign notions of cultural practice.

(1990: 143)

Unlike Neruda’s position, Morphet’s is distinctly secular and, to my mind, problematic. By conceiving future transformation as a matter of reframing our aesthetic and geo-political inheritance and influence, Morphet sustains rather than confounds the very revisionist authority he contests. Deferring to poststructuralist and postmodern theorizations, that of Frederic Jameson in particular, Morphet notes:

Whether history is, or is not, also only a text, is still under dispute; but what is no longer tenable is the view that it is accessible to us in some way beyond or behind texts.

(ibid.)

This highly secular assumption, masqueraded here as authoritative, is, as I have suggested, in turn disputable: hence my deferral to being and not meaning. Cultural production is not the sum of its forms and meanings. Just as I have claimed that the new critical position is not reducible to the reification of forms – that, like Neruda, it hankers after a Bergsonian élan vital, a life that ‘transcends all structures’ – I would argue that Morphet’s third settlement is not only epistemologically limiting but, given this essay’s searching inquiry into cultural freedom, complacent and false.² While I wholly concur with Morphet’s desire to shift cultural and intellectual productivity from the closures of revisionism, this shift cannot be achieved by postulating textual inscription – whether perceived as bounded or open – as the frontier of meaning. There is, I would argue, an accessible world ’beyond [and behind] texts.’ And it is precisely
this world that Sachs intuits and registers in and through the signs of ‘freedom’ and the ‘imagination.’

Here, however, we must never cease to remember that Sachs conceived his cultural vision in the mid- to late 1980s; that is, at roughly the same time that Coetzee, in his ‘Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech,’ spoke of the ethical impossibility of freedom, of the fact that the ‘gulag’ of the apartheid imagination imprisoned each and every protest; that, in short, any critical or imaginative move beyond closure was nothing short of hopeless. It is therefore within and against this pathological inheritance that one must measure the pathos and wish-fulfilment of Sachs’s celebratory will. Given the bleak context of its inception it is a will that is all the more remarkable. That this will is hampered by the political vision that in part constrained it by no means suggests that it is a will that has wholly failed. If Sachs fails, in Morphet’s words, ‘to unpick the crucial lock’ of psychic entrapment, this does not mean that he has failed to sustain a way forward. The challenge, then, is to develop the ethos of celebration that Sachs cherishes. More importantly, the challenge today is to rethink or re-imagine the negative closures that continue to dog cultural expression.

In his response to the controversy that raged over his paper, Sachs, in ‘Afterword: The taste of an avocado pear,’ noted:

> The culture of debate is perhaps more important than the debate of culture ... Art and artistic endeavour need no justification. Perhaps we should not even try to define art, just do it and respond to it and argue about it. What I cannot regret is that there has been such a fierce discussion. A conversa continua – may the debate continue.

(1990b: 148)

It is precisely here that Sachs challenges the critique of the new critical or liberal/formalist position, for in stating that art and artistic endeavor need no justification he reinforces the ineluctable provenance of cultural production founded on Macleish’s aphorism. Freedom within the domain of art can never be a doctrine. No retrogressive or teleological system can ever contain it. My argument, moreover, goes so far as to say that within the domain of critical praxis an equivalent value potentially pertains. It is the being of a thought and not only its meaning which will most surely break the deadlock and breach the divide between critical and artistic processes of expression, the boundaries of which, increasingly, have begun to blur.

Contrary to Sachs’s last point, however, I believe that the agency of critical thinking does not only pertain to debate. While debate is an attendant necessity, it does not necessarily result in what Sachs most dearly values, which is a ‘freedom of conscience’; a freedom that Neruda eloquently describes as ‘new rules of conduct for the soul.’ Much remains to be said and done if South Africa as a society of thinkers and artists is to attain this vaunted freedom. And here perhaps Coetzee is absolutely right when he suggests that freedom, if it truly exists, is only possible in and through closure and entrapment. The ghetto and the gulag do not disappear when one announces an age of freedom. Freedom is conditional and, contrary to those who preach a newfangled
positivism and relativism, freedom, today, is all the more difficult to achieve, given a national and global inclination towards fear and compromise. If, then, I charge Coetzee – finally – with being a fatalist, it is because more than any other South African cultural analyst he well knows that fatality and freedom are not mutually exclusive and Janus-faced but interpenetrative; that they lie on the same side of a single coin. It is this acute and seemingly baffling insight which has set *Life and Times of Michael K* apart and has distinguished it as the greatest work of the imagination ever to have emerged from this psychically disfigured country. One cannot advance without first understanding this paradoxical intersection of fatalism and freedom. This too is an epistemological leap; a strange leap indeed, for today freedom is a pathological choice one assumes at one’s own peril.

If we as a South African society are, increasingly, bypassing the doctrinaire legitimacy of the ANC; if we have embarked upon a fatalistic dance with globalization; this does not mean that we have wholly lost our capacity as thinkers and artists to rethink the aporia in Sachs’s paper. We remain children on the margins of hope. Though still trapped, we are beginning to articulate the dream of freedom. We may continue to live with the terrible unease of never having begun. We may feel to the depths of our being the terrible irony of Sachs’s position; a position which in the twelve years since its utterance has been reduced to mere rhetorical wish-fulfilment, precisely because the weak-willed and the ironical among us have deemed the vision impossible. Still the struggle towards a transcendent and celebratory cultural imagination continues. Despite the fact that we are caught today in a global gulag that preys upon fear and hopelessness, we continue to ‘live through the mutation of human order avidly.’ Preparation is a permanent condition.

Ashraf Jamal can be contacted at the School of Language, Culture and Communication, University of Natal, Private Bag X01, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg 3209, South Africa. e-mail: jamala@nu.ac.za

Notes

1. Lionel Abrahams’ understanding of ‘indifferent time’ echoes Nietzsche’s notion of the ‘untimely present’ and Benjamin’s notion of the ‘time of the now.’ This understanding also echoes the conception of the ‘everyday’ and the ‘ordinary’ as that which cannot be grasped through a causal interpretation of time, and, therefore, cannot be conscripted into a retrospective and teleological conception of change. Rather, the ordinary exists in another dimension. Henri Lefebvre gets to the crux of the ordinary, or everyday, when he describes it as ‘the invisible visible’: ‘[B]y giving form and content to an experience so vague and seemingly natural that part of its significance is that its subjects cannot define it, by defining, or theorizing the everyday, it is transformed into what it is not.’ It is this more enigmatic conceptualization of the everyday that echoes Abrahams’ notion of indifferent time. Here it should also be noted that the term – indifference – has assumed a
negative spin and is intended to foreground the metatropes of sameness and unity-in-difference which signal the nullification of difference in postmodern South African culture. See Leon de Kock's introduction to South Africa in the Global Imaginary, Poetics Today, 22: 2.

2. This remains an unresolved debate. My view is that the economy of signification as that which is reducible to textuality is an insufficient means through which to understand how meaning comes about. Given the heady days that spawned the culture of textual critique, and, given its marked absence at the time in South African literary studies, it is not surprising that Morphet should defer to Jameson. However, in hindsight, and with the hither side of the future before us, there is no disputing the fact that world society is advancing towards yet another age of ignorance; an age beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion and irony, in which thought – whether self-critical or not – is no longer the agent of reason and the textual apparatus which sustains it.

References