

# Stephen Biko and the Torture Aesthetic

Marian Eide

“Torture has an indelible character.  
Whoever was tortured, stays tortured.”  
—Jean Améry

## Abstract

*Stephen Biko's death in South Africa in 1977 under the apartheid regime has become an iconic event for the global human-rights community for whom he is an international symbol. In the aesthetic realm—in works of art in a wide variety of forms including poetry, drama, popular song, film, and visual arts—his memory has been kept alive for over three decades. This essay focuses on three popular, transnational works of art that lay claim on global audiences to participate in an idealized universal citizenship founded on an objection to torture that is both the assumption and motivation for their art. Peter Gabriel's 1980 song "Biko," Richard Attenborough's 1987 film "Cry Freedom," and Saira Essa and Charles Pillai's 1985 documentary play Steve Biko: The Inquest each in its own formal register (song, film, play), memorializes torture to produce an iconography of political martyrdom that I will call the torture aesthetic. Biko iconography stands here as a particularly potent example of a larger trend within aesthetic practices in which a historical example of brutality is invoked to activate audiences and to raise concerns within human rights discourse itself.*

An internationally-recognized prisoner of South Africa's apartheid regime, Stephen Biko,<sup>1</sup> leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, died in detention on September 12, 1977. He had been apprehended under the Terrorism Act of 1967, ostensibly for writing and distributing a pamphlet critical of the government and also for breaking the "banning" order that restricted his travel. His treatment at the hands of Special Branch security police, while horrific, was not unusual during this regime. In fact, he was the forty-sixth person to die in prison since detention without trial was legalized in 1963, but he was the first with international

recognition as a political thinker and leader. Biko was kept naked for most of the twenty-five days of his detention, allegedly to prevent suicide attempts. After sustaining blunt force injuries to his head, he was chained to a wall for forty-eight continuous hours. Lapsing into coma, no longer controlling his bodily functions, he was left lying on a mat soaked with his own urine. In this condition, he was driven in the back of a jeep over seven-hundred miles from the Cape Elizabeth prison to a Pretoria hospital. He died shortly after his arrival (Bernstein 1978: 5).

Biko's death has become an indelible, even an iconic event for the global community for whom he is an international symbol of the battle for racial justice and human rights. In the aesthetic realm—in works of art in a wide variety of forms including poetry, drama, popular song, film, and visual arts—his memory has been kept alive for over three decades. Biko's death has not been aestheticized as such—it is not represented as beautiful in a way that diminishes the horror of his dying—rather, it is a recurrent image in aesthetic productions. This essay will focus on three popular, transnational works of art that lay claim on global audiences to participate in an idealized universal citizenship founded on an objection to torture that is both the assumption and motivation for their art. Peter Gabriel's 1980 song "Biko," Richard Attenborough's 1987 film "Cry Freedom," and Saira Essa and Charles Pillai's 1985 documentary play *Steve Biko: The Inquest* each in its own formal register (song, film, play), memorializes torture to produce an iconography of political martyrdom that I will call the torture aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> Biko iconography stands here as a particularly potent example of a larger trend within aesthetic practices in which a historical example of brutality is invoked to activate audiences. I will begin by defining the torture aesthetic, before recounting Biko's history, and finally turning to the implementation of the aesthetic in these three creative works, which stand in as exemplars of a more prevalent practice of torture aesthetics.

### **Torture Aesthetic**

When holocaust survivor Jean Amery writes that "torture has an indelible character," his emphasis is on the way in which victims re-experience the emotions that visited them during torture, on the recurrence of suffering, and on the repetition of traumatic

memory in the present. In these cases victims are constantly returned to the traumatic moment, which becomes an indelible part of consciousness (Amery 1980: 34). In works of art that memorialize such traumatic events, “torture has an indelible character” in another sense: re-presenting the tortured and the event of torturing freezes a martyr in the place of being wounded, in the perpetual present of the art form. However, this indelible presence has a radically different effect than does the recurrence of traumatic memory. Rather than returning the victim helplessly to the traumatic past, the torture aesthetic works on its audiences to produce a shared obligation to a future freed from such violations; in other words, the work of art, through the (perpetual) victim of torture, claims the power to activate an audience’s latent potentials for political involvement by raising consciousness, changing attitudes, and creating a sense of belonging and even responsibility. This kind of “affective community,” as Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues, is necessary to produce and transmit collective memory from the arguably inert material of history. At the same time, as Bill Ashcroft argues using terminology borrowed from Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, collective memory creates a “smooth space that flows through and around the striated space of history” (Ashcroft 2010: 28). That smooth space might blur some of the specificities and responsibilities of history’s striations, and the torture aesthetic contributes to this smoothing process. In some rare instances, the torture aesthetic is cited as the mode through which collective memory becomes a spur to political activism. While torture creates victims who live on in the perpetual return of traumatic time, representation creates martyrs who have the potential to organize collectives that act in response to suffering. Those representations assist in determining, as Dominic LaCapra observes, “what aspects of the past justifiably merit being passed on as living heritage” (LaCapra 1998: 64). In this process, the tortured body is transformed into an icon spurring others to right action. Thus, we might distinguish between traumatic time, which requires a perpetual return to the place of suffering in psychological processes of working through traumatic memory, and martyrological time, which freezes torture in the perpetual present of cultural memory to forecast political responsibilities.

Benjamin Zephania’s 2001 poem “Biko, The Greatness,” for example, memorializes the indelibility of torture within

martyrological time by claiming: “Knowing that nobody dies until they’re forgotten / We chant Biko today / Biko tomorrow / Biko forever.” In these lines, Zephania both assumes and creates a community (“we chant”) founded on the martyr’s suffering and death. The creation and maintenance of this community relies on the repeated utterance and invocation of the martyred Biko. Zephania’s lyric forecasts that this collective memory can produce political transformation.

Janet Maslin suggests a similar possibility in her review of *Cry Freedom*: “Biko’s terrible death in 1977, at age 30, at the hands of South Africa’s Security Police (who at first tried to maintain that Biko had willfully starved to death or died of self-inflicted head wounds, until an inquest determined otherwise), was in some ways the most important event of his career, since it so outraged and galvanized many of his countrymen” (Maslin 1987: C14). Though Maslin’s tone can be read as callous, her heavily ironic emphasis is on the loss of potential in this early death as much as on the potency of the martyr in initiating political action. Biko himself had a similar thought when he wrote about death in detention, “your method of death can be a politicizing thing. . . . So, if you can overcome the personal fear of death, which is a highly irrational thing, you know, then you’re on your way” (Biko 2002: 152).

Within the torture aesthetic, violent events themselves are often radically absent: surrounding details are described or depicted, the aftermath of bodily harm may be attentively cataloged, but the torture itself is cloaked. This absence has the effect suggested by Elaine Scarry (1985) in *The Body in Pain*, in which the unrepresentable stands in for the incommunicable; the failure of language to describe pain as it is experienced is mirrored in the representational absence. This absence also functions to underscore a threatening sense of extremity: the event must be horrific to warrant its exclusion from narrative. Absence also replicates the secrecy and distortions of political regimes, such as that of the Republic of South Africa during apartheid, that rely on torture and hide its use and effects. Finally, the absence at the center of narrative elicits a desire to know, a feeling that the inscrutability of this basic historical fact obliges a recipient to discover the truth, inducing a hope that is characteristic of martyrological time’s orientation to the future; the hope is that knowing can also carry the

potential to prevent future acts of torture. This drive to discover creates an experience of anticipation for audiences who want to gain knowledge about the martyr, to share that knowledge, and through the combination of compassion and information to participate in the politics of prevention.

There are limits on this orientation, however; engaging in the torture aesthetic carries with it the risk of assuming the role of the privileged and advantaged group burdened with the necessity of assuring the human rights of the subaltern. In the post-Holocaust context in which human-rights discourses and practices have expanded and ideally attempted to reverse some of the valences of imperial exploitation, human rights can nonetheless carry the residue of Eurocentric privilege. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes, “‘Human Rights’ is not only about having or claiming a right or a set of rights; it is also about righting wrongs, about being the dispenser of these rights” (Spivak 2004: 523-524). Practitioners of the transnational torture aesthetic, and especially artists working from imperial centers, walk a fine line between testimony, community activism, and privileged patronage that carries with it a dangerous complacency about the activist’s position as benefactor. This potential is at the heart of Alain Badiou’s critique of *universal* human rights discourse situated within an ethos centered on cultural relativism and the responsibility of each to “the other”: “Who cannot see that this ethics which rests on the misery of the world hides, behind its victim-Man, the good-Man, the white-Man?” (Badiou 2001: 13). At the same time that the torture aesthetic participates in global democratization in which cultural relativism barely contends with the remaindered flash points of imperial control, this aesthetic also assumes basic and universal human rights defined in the West during the period of republican revolutions, in which the claims of universality largely excluded precisely those African subjects enslaved throughout the European empires. Yet it is also African subjects—from Biafra to South Sudan—who have been over the last half century most often cited as victims that the West or Global North cites as its universal responsibility: “the misery of the world hides, behind its victim-Man, the good-Man, the white-Man.”

Thus the torture aesthetic presents itself as a catalyst for conscientization, creating an implied audience that participates in a philanthropic, idealized, universal citizenship founded on

objection to torture, a community based on an abstract ideal of shared global responsibility. Like other aesthetic categories, such as the beautiful or the sublime, this aesthetic is practiced across artistic forms and genres; it is present in paintings and photographs, songs and films, plays and poetry. The specific efficacy of each work depends, as do other aesthetic categories, on the capacity for the particular work to produce a desired response in its audience.

### **Prisoner 46**

For those unfamiliar with Stephen Bantu Biko's biography, a brief synopsis of his activist career may be welcome. While at the University of Natal where he studied medicine, Biko was involved in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), a multiracial body opposed to apartheid laws;<sup>3</sup> however, his involvement convinced him of the need for nonwhite leadership among students and he founded the nonviolent, interracial South African Students' Organization (SASO) in 1968. The group reflected Biko's wider investment in Black Consciousness, a political philosophy tied to the Black Power movement of the United States and the Négritude philosophical interventions elsewhere in Africa and in the Caribbean. Black Consciousness advocated an awareness of Pan-African history and culture, and a belief in antiracist principles of governance, individual positive regard and self-worth, black self-reliance, solidarity among black people, and economic empowerment.<sup>4</sup> Biko described his approach:

Being black is not a matter of pigmentation—being black is a reflection of mental attitude.

Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being.

(Biko 2002: 48)

Because of his activist work, his public investments in community organizing, and his political philosophy, Biko was dismissed from the university in his third year, but pursued a

correspondence education in the law. Much of his time after university was devoted to township development. In 1972 he founded the Black People's Convention and traveled throughout South Africa talking to groups about black consciousness and self-actualization along with practical community and economic skills development. He became internationally known for his work in the antiapartheid movement following the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the rival Pan African Congress (PAC). His reputation fretted the Republic of South Africa (RSA) apartheid security apparatus, and in 1973 he was "banned"; this sentence restricted his movement to the area of King William's Town, disallowed any public speaking to the extent that his voice could not be heard on radio or TV, and prohibited his words from being quoted in newspapers or magazines; he was allowed to meet only one person at a time outside his immediate family. In spite of the banning, he continued to work within the movement, founding the *Black Review*, a health clinic, workshops for leadership training, a fund for the families of political prisoners, and cottage industries that produced cloth and leather goods within the township (where there were few other opportunities for gainful employment). Additionally, his writings gained recognition, and he received visits from international legislators and domestic and foreign journalists, each of whom made the trek to his remote home in King William's Town to conduct interviews and conversations. Some credit his leadership and Black Consciousness thought for student resistance across the country, which culminated in the Soweto Uprising and violent crackdown on June 16, 1976. He was frequently arrested, detained, and questioned in the year following the Soweto Uprising.<sup>5</sup>

Biko was acutely aware of the threatening state security apparatus. He had been detained repeatedly, once for 101 days. He had resisted beating by police during one interrogation by catching the assailant's hand and convincing him that conversation would elicit more information than violence. He was certain he would be arrested again, and told friends and family that if he died in detention they were not to believe that he had committed suicide or gone on hunger strike (Woods 1987; Bernstein 1978). "You are either alive and proud," he wrote, "or you are dead, and when you are dead, you don't care anyway" (Biko 2002:152).

Biko was detained on August 18, 1977 at a routine road block and arrested for violating his banning order by traveling out of his home district. He was accused of carrying seditious materials, though convincing evidence for this charge was never presented. He was held under section six of the *Terrorism Act*, which allowed the government to hold citizens without warrant, to withhold information from detainees, and to interrogate without legal justification and without time constraints. He was kept in solitary confinement without exercise or fresh air; naked after his clothes were confiscated, he was left with only a blanket and a thin mat for sleeping; he was not allowed to bathe; his food was inadequate. On the morning of September 6, he was subjected to interrogation during which time he was beaten with a hosepipe; the attack was catalyzed by his request for a chair on which to sit during questioning (Bizos 1998). He was also handcuffed and shackled by the ankles to a wall (even during sleep) and finally denied access to bathroom facilities. In Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings at Port Elizabeth two decades later, “hundreds of spectators at the hearings let out a sound of anguish” on hearing that Biko was chained to the interrogation room door in mock crucifixion, his legs attached by shackles to the grillwork (Bizos 1998: 60, Graybill 2002: 116).<sup>6</sup> By the morning of September 8 he had sustained blunt-force injuries to the head. Postmortem accounts would indicate a “contracoup injury” in which his head was knocked suddenly and with sufficient force to recoil such that the soft tissue of the brain smashed against the interior of the skull, causing internal bleeding in his brain and resulting in immediate loss of consciousness. On September 12, he was pronounced dead. Though the police first claimed he died as the result of a hunger strike, doctors who examined his body both before and after death testified that there was no indication of starving in the large man’s slightly overweight body, while bruises and swelling on his forehead, cheek, and lip, abnormal reflex responses, and blood in the spinal fluid all pointed to brain damage as the reason for death (Bizos 1998). The Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger, who oversaw the police and prison systems, joked with the foreign press, “a man can damage his brain many ways . . . I have also felt like banging my head against a brick wall many times, but realizing now, with the Biko autopsy that may be fatal, I haven’t done it” (Bizos 1998: 49).

Commemoration of Biko’s death began almost immediately, both in South Africa and abroad. His funeral was held at

the King William's Town stadium to accommodate the mourning crowds. Poetry, song, drama, and film memorialized his life work and sudden death.<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Clarke's documentary, *The Life and Death of Steve Biko*, was released in 1978. That year also saw the release of Peter Hammill's song "A Motor Bike in Afrika," Tom Paxton's song "The Death of Stephen Biko," and the Johnny Mbizo Dyani album *Song for Biko*. In the following years, musicians as diverse as Christie Moore, Public Enemy, Dave Matthews, and Sweet Honey in the Rock composed songs in Biko's memory. But Peter Gabriel's 1980 song "Biko" has had perhaps the most profound impact on audiences.

### **Conspiracy of Hope**

As he did on so many occasions during the apartheid years, Peter Gabriel closed his June 15, 1986 "Conspiracy of Hope" benefit concert for Amnesty International by introducing "Biko" to a sold-out crowd at Giant Stadium: "This is a song written for a man of peace who was working for his people, was arrested, tortured for many months, and killed in jail in South Africa. The song is dedicated to all the people in South Africa who have just been imprisoned in the last weekend."<sup>8</sup> Gabriel's introduction invokes the torture aesthetic in memorializing a martyr in order to create a community of activist awareness, to incite through the memory of torture the desire to effect change. In his introductory gesture as well as in the song itself, he moves from the particular victim outward to shared, global response. Gabriel's performances called increasingly on audience participation, in which the song's themes of community and global responsibility resonated with the stadium experience; "the rest is up to you," he tells his audience in 1986, associating the community of song with the activist community.

The song signaled the beginning of Gabriel's commitment to "world music" and specifically to gaining global recognition for African musicians. The fusion approach must walk a fine line between comparison and synthesis, on the one hand, and appropriation or even imperialism, such as Badiou and Spivak observe in human-rights discourses, on the other. This early attempt bears some of the flaws of appropriation along with the strengths of synthesis. The lyric is accompanied by drum rhythms borrowed somewhat generically from musicians of the southern tip of Africa

and fused with Western rock instrumentation.<sup>9</sup> The most prominent instrument is the electric guitar behind the lead singer's voice, played with the heavy distortion characteristic of rock ballads. Between verses a synthesizer picks up the dirge sounds of the bagpipes played at European funerals. Vocalizations without words begin and end the song, imitating the harmonies and rhythms of *isicathamiya* music from South Africa (recognizable internationally in the music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo). Popular song lyrics often stand up poorly on the page without the accompaniment of sound and rhythm, but Gabriel's anthemic ode to the dead hero also works well as a lyrical poem.

September '77  
 Port Elizabeth weather fine  
 It was business as usual  
 In police room 619  
 Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko  
 Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko  
 Yihla Moja, Yihla Moja  
 The man is dead

When I try to sleep at night  
 I can only dream in red  
 The outside world is black and white  
 With only one colour dead  
 Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko  
 Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko  
 Yihla Moja, Yihla Moja  
 The man is dead

You can blow out a candle  
 But you can't blow out a fire  
 Once the flames begin to catch  
 The wind will blow it higher  
 Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko  
 Yihla Moja, Yihla Moja  
 The man is dead

And the eyes of the world are  
 watching now  
 watching now

The lyric begins by commemorating the month of Biko's death and contrasting the tragedy of his suffering with the platitude of

fine weather. The actual killing by torture occurs off stage, so to speak; in the conventions of trauma arts, the song elides the scene of bodily damage which cannot be described, which exceeds both the songwriter's imagination and the powers of representation. In the place of direct description the song introduces the metonym of the torture chamber (police room 619) and thereby shifts emphasis from the suffering of the martyr to the guilt of the perpetrators for whom such acts of violence had already become routine, the "business as usual" that continued nearly ten years later to the weekend of the "Conspiracy of Hope" concert performance.

The thrice-repeated chorus ("Biko, Biko, because Biko") relies on parhyme that produces both specificity and urgency.<sup>10</sup> "Biko" is parhymed with "because;" in the initial sounding it suggests that Biko was killed because of who he was: because he was Biko he ended up in "police room 619."<sup>11</sup> But as the chorus repeats, the association shifts, turning Stephen Biko into an initiating force, the (be)cause for an unnamed but collectively acknowledged objective. The refrain concludes with a quotation from the anthem of the antiapartheid movement—now the national anthem of South Africa—"Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika." "Yihla moya" is in Biko's own Xhosa language and means "descend spirit."<sup>12</sup> The multilingual refrain recalls the multilingualism of the dead martyr, the varied cultures between which he lived, and the aspirations he expressed for a multiracial nation, acknowledging the varied cultures on which it was built. The refrain invokes the spirit of Stephen Biko to descend, an invocation that calls upon his philosophical influence in the Afrocentric liberation of an oppressed people. By asking the audience to sing along with him, Gabriel produces a shadow version of the intercultural community imagined by his hero and also produces the martyrological time in which the suffering of torture is turned into the impetus and rationale for an optimistic future in which the ideals the martyr expressed are embodied in the polity.<sup>13</sup> In his song introduction, Gabriel suggested that the audience participate in an Amnesty International letter-writing campaign addressed to the South African government, protesting detention policy.

Moving from the communal to the personal, the lyrics invoke the terror of torture; the "red" of the singer's dream reminds listeners of blood, bruise, abrasion, and pain: the unspeakable effects of the unnamable harm to the political prisoner's body. Seeing in

“black and white,” the singer names the colors that metaphorize South Africa’s racial politics, emphasizing that one race suffers disproportionately, “with only one colour dead.” As music critic Michael Drewett notes, “Biko’s death was a consequence of the government’s attempt to maintain the hegemony of whiteness” (Drewett 2007: 43).

The third verse relies on the familiar lyrical association of the candle with the spirit or living soul and its extinction with death (“You can blow out a candle”). However, the lyrical opening shifts to the more activist language of the fire ignited by an idea and impossible to quench once communities commit to it (“But you can’t blow out a fire / Once the flames begin to catch / The wind will blow it higher”). The verse moves from the death of one man to the movement kept alive in his name, acknowledging the extent to which Biko’s death fired Black Consciousness and antiapartheid activism both in his own country and across the globe, where “the eyes of the world are watching now.” Gabriel ends with the duty to witness that human rights discourses rely on internationally. And, in fact, far from putting this song to rest in his concert appearances with the end of apartheid in 1994, Gabriel still sings the piece a cappella, with his band and in joint appearances beside Youssou N’Dour. As the song winds to a close, the audience is called to join in a synecdochal performance of torture aesthetic’s assumption of community responsibility to the oppressed. Across the world, audiences of all cultures, countries, and colors are inspired to raise their arms, fists clenched in the black power salute adopted by the protest movement in South Africa, following Biko’s lead. In the arena audiences sing along; presumably they know the words because they have listened to this song repeatedly. Gabriel’s anthem is designed to stand up to such repetition; the song can be used not only to raise awareness but also to rally the aware, to feed the spirits of an engaged community.

Through Gabriel’s lyric vision the traumatic events of 1977 become the impetus for an international effort to ensure human rights in the names of those who have been injured or lost, and specifically in the name of Stephen Biko. The damages of the past become a specific obligation to the future. Michael Drewett experienced that obligation directly when, as a white, South African, pop-music-obsessed teen, he learned of the national censorship of Peter Gabriel’s third solo album, which includes “Biko.” Outraged

by the banning of what seemed to him a harmless and pleasing song, Drewett researched Biko's life for a class presentation on South African censorship policy. In the course of his readings in newspaper archives, he encountered for the first time "the emotive coverage of the death, by torture, of an innocent man because of his political convictions. . . . It suddenly became clear what censorship was about. . . . It was at that point that I first became aware of apartheid as a struggle, and it was the first time I articulated my own position within that struggle" (Drewett 2007). Drewett provides an example of the ordinary person's transformation, through the torture aesthetic, to a political awareness and a continued sense of social responsibility.

### **Close-Up**

The fine balance between fusion and appropriation practiced in Gabriel's song is attempted also in Richard Attenborough's film, though with more ambiguous effects. In 1987, a decade after Biko's death, Gabriel contributed his song to a video production publicizing the new film, *Cry Freedom*. While Gabriel's song was censored in South Africa, Attenborough's film was not.<sup>14</sup> For many viewers it stood in for the images lost when the regime began in the 1980s effectively to censor international television coverage of black resistance.<sup>15</sup> Mass protests, mass arrests, and increasing deaths in detention brought international attention to apartheid South Africa. However, photographic images of racist repression were carefully controlled from Pretoria. *Cry Freedom* had many shortcomings, but provided powerful images of both repression and resistance by narrating the life and death of Stephen Biko (Denzel Washington) through the eyes of his friend Donald Woods (Kevin Kline), while at the same time skating at the edge of the morality Badiou rejects.

The film is replete with Attenborough's signature aesthetic of grandeur: panoramic shots of southern Africa's beautiful countryside are matched by elaborately choreographed mass crowd scenes including the destruction of the Crossroads settlement, the Soweto massacre, and Biko's funeral throng. The film's most intimate sequence is set in the modest interior of the Port Elizabeth jail. In the foreground one black foot is raised from the floor for examination by a white hand. In the background a middle-aged, white

face displays only clinical care. As the foot comes into the camera frame a shackle is shown around the ankle, and its clanking is the only diegetic sound; the white physician runs the handle of his reflex hammer along the sole of his patient's foot, and there is no response.<sup>16</sup> In the background, shadows from the low lighting cast multiple copies of the cell bars across the prisoner's body while the doctor's face is caught in deep chiaroscuro. As he releases the unresponsive foot, the soundtrack repeats the clanking sound of the shackles returning to the floor. The camera moves out from the foot along the inert, supine body. The tracking shot focuses viewers' attention on the beauty, youth, and power of the actor; the muscles of his legs are strong and taut as if ready for action; in contrast, the shadows of the prison bars and the sound of shackles emphasize his captivity. When the shot finally focuses on Denzel Washington's face, viewers see for the first time visual evidence of torture on the swollen, distorted features of the handsome actor. The camera pauses for several long seconds on a close-up of his damaged face; the only accompanying sound is the actor's labored breathing. The lengthy shot challenges viewers with the combined emotions of attraction and revulsion: an appreciation of the body's beauty is coupled with an automatic revulsion and horror at the hideous damage done to the face. Turning the political actor into an object of the cinema viewer's gaze while making beautiful a body that has been damaged, the film provokes divided responses of desire and fear while at the same time negotiating the fine line between aestheticizing torture and testifying to its brutality by coopting an audience's appreciation for physical beauty. The display of this specifically black body is troubled by transnational associations with the auctioneer's exhibition of slave bodies and the racist display of (injured or lynched) black bodies exhibited in the service of white supremacy.

To arrive at this place of injury, the film cuts its narrative from Biko's arrest at a highway check point to a lengthy shot following the physician into the cell where the activist is detained. Viewers inured to visual violence and the intricate spectacle of torture ubiquitous in more recent film and television may find oddly chaste the omission of the brutal acts that damaged Biko's body. But the omission makes several claims implicitly: first, that torture cannot be imagined and to attempt to narrate it is to diminish the extent of the horror; and, second, that to engage the viewer in the position

of watching torture is to turn this form of violence into a kind of pornography; in other words, torture should not be aestheticized. Making these choices attempts to mitigate some of the shameful history of displaying racialized injury. Viewers are not permitted to believe that, merely for the price of admission, they can experience or know the horror Biko suffered. Rather, the viewer is left literally and figuratively in the dark. Instead, the film produces another kind of aesthetic response to Biko's torture, divided between attraction and revulsion based on the careful beautification of this prison scene. Evidence of torture is medicalized; the viewer is placed in the position of the ineffectual white doctor who examines the prisoner's inert body and demands that Biko be given "specialist" attention. The white physician's response cues the viewer's reaction: his initial clinical and objective expression held at the center of the camera shot becomes increasingly warped by horror.<sup>17</sup> The assumption of identification between the white doctor and the cinema audience, however, is one of the problematic decisions inspired by the torture aesthetic's conscientizing goal: the audience is assumed to be both white and ignorant, though potentially culpable, in a framing choice that also privileges white viewing and the potential of each viewer to become "the good-Man, the white-Man" who, out of a history of imperial expansion holds the privilege to dispense international human rights.

Adapted from Donald Woods's memoirs *Biko* and *Asking for Trouble*, the film as a whole is narrated as a white man's story: his political transformation in the course of a friendship with the activist, his public attempts to investigate and document Biko's death, and his family's consequent flight from South Africa. This framing device, focusing on a white man's experience of apartheid oppression, elicited harsh criticism, especially from American film critics.<sup>18</sup> Though praise for Denzel Washington's performance in the role of Stephen Biko (for which he received an Academy Award nomination) was unanimous, the fact that the activist was relegated to the role of supporting figure troubled reviewers.<sup>19</sup> While acknowledging the narrative logic that follows a conventional story of personal transformation in combination with a suspense thriller about escape from hostile forces, reviewers were critical of the shift away from Biko's own compelling story. The *New York Times's* Janet Maslin expressed the view strongly: "It is most unfortunate that this film, with its potential for focusing worldwide attention

on the plight of black South Africans, should concentrate its energies on a white man” (Maslin 1987: C14). Vincent Canby, also in the *New York Times*, noted that this shift away from Biko further complicated a film that could already be accused of preaching to the converted rather than educating the uninformed: “It could be that it will mostly alienate those members of the audience who know the facts and already share the film maker’s anger with an intolerable situation. It’s Sir Richard’s odd achievement to have made an antiapartheid movie that not only does not preach to the converted, but also angers them” (Canby 1987: 25). Jay Scott of the Canadian *Globe and Mail* incisively skewered an unacknowledged assumption of the film: to reach a wide audience, to secure the kind of funding that allowed for panoramic nature scenes and populous crowd shots, the story must appeal to white viewers. That assumption, he argued, reinforces the racism it ostensibly critiques by placing white viewing as the norm against which black responses are an exception and by making white viewers the desired audience. Scott describes Attenborough’s as a production

in which the ultimate horror of apartheid, the final proof of its moral bankruptcy, is not so much what it does to blacks, which is bad enough, but what it does to its own people—to whites. Attenborough’s reading of the “mass audience” rests on three debatable assumptions: (1) that the “mass audience” is white; (2) that whites are not prepared to sit through a cinematic treatment of the life of Stephen Biko, unless the life is used as—the pun is lamentably exact—local color; (3) and that the only way to get whites to care about the plight of blacks in South Africa is to give whites an apartheid story in which whites themselves suffer as the result of the system.

While I am persuaded by these film reviewers’ incisive critiques, I also think it is possible to read the film as targeted to white audiences in part to indict white viewers as implicated in apartheid racism and responsible in the manner that Woods comes to expect of himself in the course of the film and that Drewett testifies to in his appreciation of Gabriel’s music. The danger of this approach is to assure audiences of their privilege as, to use Spivak’s term, “dispenser of rights.” In other words, the narrative emphasis on the witness to torture patterns the viewers’ obligations to witness

while assuming their ownership of dispersible rights. Desson Howe of *The Washington Post* questioned the efficacy of such a strategy, noting that *Cry Freedom* “is a pill movie. You take it with a glass of water and you feel better about your social consciousness in the morning” (Howe 1987: N37). Mark Gevisser in *The Nation* also remarked on the problematic catharsis of this narrative arc, describing himself joining Donald Woods’s escape through the cinematic trickery of narrative identification: “I had sobbed, while three hours whizzed by, and now, like Kevin Kline, I was free. I went home, had a couple of nightmares and forgot about it in the morning. I had been purged” (Geviser 1988: 31). If this purgation, as Gevisser (himself a South African writer/activist) suggests, stands in the place of political action and undermines the perpetual responsibility to the futurity of martyrological time, then Attenborough’s film is no more politically significant than *Dirty Dancing* (1987). Gevisser’s review points to the necessary limit of the torture aesthetic: the catharsis experienced during the artistic experience may stand in for moral and political action or involvement. Feeling sympathy, fear, and identification during a performance can substitute for acting on those feelings in another realm.

However, Attenborough’s film also foregrounds Biko’s absence in death both through this controversial framing device and because of Washington’s spectacularly charismatic performance. The film may produce in its audience an identification with the white journalist, but it also creates a *longing* for the black activist, a longing that Attenborough specifically channels into the martyrological time of testimony and political engagement. At the same time, the focus on Woods and the white liberal predicament under apartheid once again points up the need for Biko’s initial political move into autonomous, Afrocentric politics with the founding of SASO, which was necessitated by the dominance of white liberals in student antiapartheid leadership. The film unintentionally replicates the dominance of the white perspective in this African struggle (Kael 1987: 103).

*Cry Freedom*’s screenwriter, John Briley, noted that he had tried to structure the film so as to indicate the extent to which Biko’s death produced a keen sense of responsibility in his mourners. His concept for the film was to begin with Woods’s flight from South Africa and to proceed through flashbacks to illuminate his friendship with Stephen Biko and Biko’s indelible mark on South African

consciousness. The flashback structure was intended to produce martyrological time, as it would “keep Biko alive throughout the whole course of the film” to indicate the extent to which that death demanded political commitment from his survivors (Briley 1994: 9). However, in the final version of the script, only the Soweto uprising and Biko’s massive funeral are chronicled in flashback. Those flashbacks serve to contrast the privilege and safety of the white, liberal journalist and his fleeing family with the conditions they leave behind. Yet because the film was based on Woods’s memoirs and his family’s tireless campaign against apartheid, that contrast also emphasizes their enduring responsibility to Biko and his memory.

### **The Inquest**

The demand for political commitment in the wake of Biko’s death is an insistent element in South African dramatists Saira Essa and Charles Pillai’s tragedy *Steve Biko: The Inquest*.<sup>20</sup> This theatrical production might best be described as a documentary play in that it distills the thirteen-day inquest into Biko’s death into a two-hour production, using as dialogue exchanges quoted directly from court transcripts.<sup>21</sup> As such it adapts the language of the archive for the aesthetic means of producing collective memory. This production is the least well known of my three examples, and also the only one written from within South Africa by its citizens, though it has been performed internationally. The play attempts both to expose the perverse logic of apartheid governance and to alter the passive status of the audience, whose theatrical experience is a refracted version of a citizen’s experience of an unjust judicial system. In drawing on the court experience, Essa and Pillai point to one of the few places in which uncensored speech about activist experience was still possible during the state of emergency; the courts unintentionally became the forum for antiapartheid debate and the place for sustaining affective community. Trials in the 1980s were mass events; George Bizos, a lawyer who represented many antiapartheid activists and their families, recalls the atmosphere at the Biko inquest, which was held in an old synagogue converted for government use: “Between the portal leading into the Synagogue and the inner edge of the pavement, there was a paved yard which could hold a singing, toyi-toyi-ing, slogan-shouting crowd of a few hundred strong.”<sup>22</sup> It served a purpose similar to the chorus in an ancient Greek play. At times it

sang ‘Senzani na? [What have we done?] to the rhythm and melody of a funeral dirge’ (Bizos 1998: 54).

Incorporating these choric interventions into the transcripts of the inquest, this play makes the case for collective response to history. It reveals, through its dramatization of this judicial archive, the outrages of the Biko case, in which official testimony was woven from lies whose strands are ornate, intricate, contradictory, and confusing. Yet the impulse produced by martyrological memory is the impulse not just for recovery, but for discovery: survivors are driven to know what happened and to turn torture into the spur for political action. The Reverend Desmond M. Tutu makes this point eloquently in his 1985 “Foreword” to the print edition of the play, where he writes to thank the playwrights for providing this testimony to trauma and also to “pray that many will go and see the play and . . . renew their commitment to rid the world of this scourge so utterly evil and immoral” (Tutu in Essa and Pillai 1986: 7). The torture aesthetic, in this case, is both documentary and activist.

The play’s adaptation of testimony leaves the audience to piece together complex and conflicting information to produce a coherent sense of historic events. In the morass of examples of deceit and misdirection the play presents, two examples will suffice. First, prison guards uniformly made the claim that Biko *slept* soundly through the night of September 6th, though by the next day he had lapsed into a coma from which he never woke. In the course of testimony from prison guards and supervisors, witnesses admit that the lights were on in the interrogation room where he lay, that he was chained to the wall, that various guards came and went through the night, that the prisoner offered a full confession before he fell asleep, and that he rested through the night while officials were coming and going through the lighted room where he lay. Colonel Piet Goosen, who supervised the detention, emphasized in a brilliant moment of unconscious testimonial, “No charges of assault have ever been laid against my assaulting team” (Essa and Pillai 1986: 36). As a group, the guards are stolidly unwilling to admit that they suspected the “sleeping” Biko might be in a coma or even that he showed any signs of ill health.

Physicians who examined Biko at the behest of the state described only minor injuries; the first notes “a small laceration on the inner aspect of his upper lip which was also swollen” but does not see bruising or swelling at his forehead (Essa and Pillai 1986:

50). A second physician examined Biko's left eye with a light, but did not see the wound already formed on the same side of his forehead. In court, this doctor speculated that the cut and bruise on Biko's forehead were not clearly visible to him because it was "coloured in the same way as the skin." Apparently the inability to observe a bruise on a black man's skin did not disqualify him as a consulting physician among the jail's black population. However, he "thought the injury to his lip might have caused a brain injury" (Essa and Pillai 1986: 67). Reflex responses cannot be faked; several prison doctors testified to an extensor plantar reflex that signals brain damage, but claimed to believe their patient—who had studied medicine at college and practiced yoga (news to his family)—was capable of shamming the reflex.

Against a morass of contradictory testimony, *Biko: The Inquest* asserts one indelible site of evidence that makes its claim on collective memory: the archive of the tortured body itself. The record of injuries detailed by Biko's autopsy provides its own testimony. Four photos included at the back of the print edition of the play record: 1) Biko at rest in the morgue; 2) a close-up of the swollen upper lip on the left side of his face, a partially healed wound over the left cheek-bone, and a lesion at his left temple the size and shape of a large paper clip; 3) a bracelet of abrasions and grotesque swelling on his right hand; 4) a swollen left foot with conspicuous cuts at the ankle and arch. In the drama, a pathologist testifies to his examination of the body and concludes that "according to medical evidence it appears probable that Biko suffered his head injury either during the night of the 6th or the early morning of the 7th before 7.30 a.m." Lesions to the brain tissue examined microscopically "were clearly indicative of severe traumatic brain contusions and contusional necrosis" (Essa and Pillai 1986: 38). The lawyer for the government rests his case in defense of the security apparatus using the tortuous logic of apartheid: "We have had the evidence that the Rubicon was crossed 6 to 8 hours after the infliction of the injury, and we accept that the latest that the head injury could have been caused was approximately 7.30 in the morning of the 7th of September. On this evidence the deceased was therefore beyond help by 3 o'clock in the afternoon of the 7th. I submit on the evidence that neither doctors nor the police could have known this and that his death was therefore not caused by any act or omission on their part amounting to an offence" (Essa and Pillai 1986: 79).<sup>23</sup> In response, "*singers shout down the Prosecutor by chanting freedom*

*slogans. There is momentary chaos. One of the singers runs onto stage and confronts the Prosecutor. At this point the Magistrate stands up and hammers the gavel onto his desk. As quickly as it began, the chaos dies down*" (Essa and Pillai 1986: 79). Moving from among the audience onto the stage, members of the cast pattern the shift from historic record to collective memory.

Productions of *Biko* stage the visible authority of the state both in the fiction of power performed with the Magistrate's gavel and in the extreme violence of the Security Branch officers. But the drama also patterns acts of protest. In the theatrical space, Essa, Pillai, and the cast of the play replicate the effect of protest by reinvigorating Western drama's choric function and seeking to transform the audience from passive consumers of spectacle into active members of a polity. They position spectators literally in the theatre but figuratively in the courtroom beside Biko's family and friends. As the play opens, the sound of "*freedom songs is heard in the foyer.*" Members of the cast planted in the audience audibly mourn and remonstrate as the brutal treatment of Biko becomes evident. The call of martyrological time is evident in the cast's response to the evidence of Biko's tortured body: as the audience files out of the theatre, the cast sings "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika," again patterning the call for an imagined nation to come, whose birth is inaugurated in part by the death of the activist.

### **"nobody dies until they're forgotten"**

Poet Mzi Mahola remembers that poets in the Black Consciousness movement often chose to write in English to reach white readership "because black people did not have to be told that they were suffering; that it was white people who caused our suffering and, therefore, should be told" (quoted in Bofelo 2008: 198).<sup>24</sup> Mahola's comment crystallizes the distinction between traumatic testimony and the torture aesthetic. The purpose of this aesthetic is not only to work through past trauma or to share with a community of the brutalized, but more urgently to reach out to an audience of the uninitiated and to continue, through the reminder of suffering, to maintain a community of conscience turned toward the futurity of martyrological time.

Democratic, post-apartheid governance in South Africa did not put to rest the call of the martyr. The Truth and Reconciliation

Commission ultimately denied amnesty to the five supplicants who confessed to involvement in Biko's death, the decision resting primarily on the lack of full disclosure from perpetrators.<sup>25</sup> In the Biko case, the impossibility of closure and the failure of justice keep alive the memory of torture and the potency of the martyr to create and sustain obligations in the international community. While the challenges facing South Africa are no longer those of apartheid and prison torture, Biko's name has entered the refrains of international campaigns against human rights abuse. The torture aesthetic keeps the name alive in collective memory.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Steven Biko was one of the most internationally recognized leaders of the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, which sought to dismantle the racist political structure instituted by the country's ruling nationalist party. For additional biographical information, see Bernstein (1978) and Bizos (1998).

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Austin (1956/1979) called for an expansion of aesthetic categories from the well-traveled territory of the sublime and the beautiful: "It is to be wished that . . . field work will soon be undertaken in, say, aesthetics; if only we could forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy." Sian Ngai (2012), most notably, takes up this charge in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, introducing new aesthetics from "cute" to "zany."

<sup>3</sup> Apartheid is an Afrikaans neologism for separate development and was the system of racial segregation and oppression enforced by the Republic of South Africa (RSA), and specifically the Nationalist party, between 1948 and 1994. The associated laws disenfranchised black populations and precluded all but ceremonial political or governmental representation; they required separate homelands and townships for black populations, restricted jobs and union membership, and the carrying of identification passes to control movement. Suppressing escalating protests against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s, the RSA instituted states of emergency that allowed for detention without trial and led to escalating numbers of deaths among activists and ordinary citizens in the final decades of the regime.

<sup>4</sup> I adopt the racial designation "black" throughout this essay in part because it is the term used in South Africa, and in part because it was Biko's umbrella term for indigenous Africans, peoples of mixed races, and migrant populations from the Indian subcontinent, in other words, all those people disenfranchised by apartheid. Additionally, the term avoids the distinction that would claim only "blacks" are authentically African, while "white" settler populations living on the continent for six and seven generations would be excluded. Since the fall of the apartheid regime the ANC has gone to great lengths to include all populations as African.

<sup>5</sup> Information on the life and works of Stephen Biko is available in Hilda Bernstein's (1978) account, in Biko's own writings (1978), Donald Woods's *Biko*, and George Bizos's *No One To Blame? In Pursuit of Justice in South Africa*.

<sup>6</sup> Biko's survivors have been among the most visible critics of the TRC process. His assailants have never fully admitted to their crimes.

<sup>7</sup> Mphutlane wa Bofelo (2008) discusses the implicit presence of Biko and his writings in Black Consciousness aesthetic productions from the apartheid era to the present in "The Influences and Representations of Biko and Black Consciousness in Poetry in Apartheid and Postapartheid South Africa/Azania."

<sup>8</sup> June 16th brings annual commemorations of the Soweto Rising. During the apartheid years these could be dangerous and brutal times with police crackdowns on gatherings, memorials, and demonstrations.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Drewett notes that "Biko" was one of Gabriel's early forays into "world" music and that the effects of incorporating African sounds are at best superficial and potentially imperial: "Gabriel was introduced to African drum beats through the soundtrack LP *Dingaka* that 'inspired the direction for the music of the song 'Biko' (Gabriel, sleeve notes to the 7-inch single version of 'Biko,' 1980). The resulting sound, however, was a simplistic attempt by Gabriel to capture what he imagined to be an exotic African drum beat without really approximating the sound he imitated. The effect is a pseudo-African drum beat, seemingly commodified for a Western audience. Indeed it seems that Gabriel's use of a generic drum beat is an indication of an imperial imagination, connecting Biko 'the African' with a simplistic, duple timing 'African drum beat'—almost the equivalent of a kick drum and snare in a rock concert. Indeed, it is within the rock concert arena that the song is performed most powerfully, when Gabriel discards the pretense of the African drum beat for a fuller rock music sound." Drewett notes that the bagpipe sound incorporated in the song through synthesizers represents one of Gabriel's early experiments in fusing sounds from disparate parts of the globe, producing a "global aesthetic" and "forging a space which is everywhere yet in a sense nowhere in particular" (Drewett 2007:41).

<sup>10</sup> Pararhyme describes the near rhyming repetition of consonants; this form was introduced into the canon of violent poetics during World War I by Wilfred Owen, who used the device repeatedly to describe injury and death in the trenches of the Western front. For Owen the inexact rhyming mirrors the groping for meaning and expression produced by injury and death.

<sup>11</sup> Drewett presents a similar reading of the chorus.

<sup>12</sup> The anthem "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" is written in the five most populous of South Africa's official eleven languages.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Urban Walker writes eloquently of the centrality of hope in communal or national processes of moral repair and cites the South African example specifically in her examination of the process of resentment, reparation, and forgiveness. See *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> “Contrary to widespread expectations, Sir Richard Attenborough’s ‘Cry Freedom,’ a film about black leader Steve Biko, has been passed by South African censors uncut and without any restrictions on its being shown here” (Claiborne 1987: C1).

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Sampson remarked on South African censorship: “During the first South African emergency in 1985 the filming of police raids and brutality in the black townships, shown on TV screens round the world, did much to arouse western indignation and the clamour for sanctions and boycotts. Now these scenes have almost disappeared from television, and even the press provides very few reports from inside the townships. . . . The American TV networks *do* receive smuggled film from inside the townships, but prefer not to show it, lest their own correspondents are expelled from the country” (Sampson 1987: 48).

<sup>16</sup> This procedure depicts the extensoplantar reflex widely discussed in the inquest (see below).

<sup>17</sup> Attenborough gives the doctor more credit for intervention than may actually be accurate. McLean and Jenkins (2003) discuss the subordination of medical needs and patients rights to the demands of the state security apparatus and the resulting failure of medical intervention in Biko’s case.

<sup>18</sup> Television was kinder to the film, as *The Times* of London’s Ivor Davis noted in quoting Leonard Matin of *Entertainment Tonight* (“A tapestry of epic grandeur with the power only the man who made *Gandhi* could possibly deliver,”) and Jeffrey Lyons of *Sneak Previews* (“Richard Attenborough was born to scrupulously conduct this blistering expose of racism and genocide”). Generally the British press was also more favorably inclined to their countryman’s epic.

<sup>19</sup> Washington himself commented: “The important thing to me was to give people a chance to find out who [Biko] is, and I think we’ve done that. And if there’s not enough of him, then that’s good, because that will whet people’s appetite” (quoted in Mitchell 1978: 32, brackets original).

<sup>20</sup> Norman Fenton and Jon Blair wrote a similar play in 1979 titled *The Biko Inquest*. In 1985 it was adapted for television in a production directed by and starring Albert Finney and aired on HBO. Saira Essa was initially involved in the collaboration but branched off to devise her own “more stylized, but more South African” drama. “I added characters, dropped others, rewrote certain sections and introduced singers. . . . It is, for many people who’ve seen it, an event” (quoted in Arkatov 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Like many protest dramas of the period, it was performed first abroad (at the Prithvi Theatre Festival in Mumbai, India) and subsequently at the Asoka Theatre in Durban and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. The international performances were held in an attempt to prevent censorship. I came across the play in the course of simple library research (the Library of Congress number shelves it next to more well-known works by Athol Fugard, Maishe Maponya, and Mbongeni Ngema). That the play was a popular production in the 1980s is indicated by its successes in Durban and Johannesburg (where the Market Theatre was the primary venue for contemporary drama), but since that time it seems to have fallen into obscurity.

<sup>22</sup> The *toyi-toyi* is a dance style characterized by raised knees, stamping feet, and clapping hands. It was used widely during public protests in the apartheid era.

<sup>23</sup> In spite of the inconsistencies in reports and evidence, the clear fabrications of security officials and medical professionals, and the postmortem evidence of head injury sustained in custody five days before Biko's death, the court concluded that there was insufficient evidence to find against the police either for an act or the omission of acts leading to his death.

<sup>24</sup> The goal of reaching and accusing white audiences is in partial tension with the broader goals of Black Consciousness: to reinvigorate black cultures and to empower black readers with a sense of self-worth.

<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the commission argued that these acts of violence could not be described proportionate political actions. While the commission would grant amnesty for violent acts committed for the sake of political objectives, they were emphatic in ruling that torture such as that inflicted on Stephen Biko could not ever be understood as a necessary political intervention.

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