



Chabani Manganyi (1940–2024): An intellectual, man of letters, and black psychologist

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HOW TO CITE:
Hayes G. Chabani Manganyi
(1940–2024): An intellectual, man of
letters, and black psychologist. *S Afr
J Sci.* 2025;121(3/4), Art. #20803.
<https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/20803>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:
 Peer review
 Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:
7 March 2025

We may well have lost one of the most impressive and scholarly thinkers of the last 50 years with the recent death of Noel Chabani Manganyi on 31 October 2024 at the age of 84. While we obviously had no control over the life and death of Manganyi, we certainly do have control over the legacy of his work and ideas. His prodigious output is a treasure trove for critical intellectuals who wish to make sense of the human condition in these troubled times of our lives, our country, and the world.

Professor Manganyi's work ranged over what can be identified as four distinct areas. Firstly, the field of psychology, and his concern to account for black subjectivity under the conditions of apartheid racism. Ironically, Chabani Manganyi always wanted to be recognised as a psychologist and psychological researcher, although the discipline of psychology, until fairly recently, was extremely remiss in acknowledging his important contributions.

It is worth highlighting some of his analysis and thinking about black subjectivity under the conditions of black oppression and subjugation. For instance, in an essay called 'Us and them'¹, published in his first book, *Being-Black-in-the-World* (1973)², he explores what could be called the material conditions of black experience, and the resultant psychology of the existential position of oppression. Manganyi discusses the interaction and dialectic of an 'us/them' opposition on the identity and lived experience of black people under apartheid. What is striking about this essay, then and now, is how mild mannered and considered it is given the backdrop of a vicious apartheid regime's control and degradation of black lives. And yet the essay is assertive and affirming of being black in the world, thus appropriating a moral position – one might even say a moral high ground – by refusing the demeaning terms of existential reference set by apartheid.

Furthermore, during his time as a postdoctoral researcher at Yale University in the early and mid-1970s, working with the renowned psychobiographer Daniel Levinson, Manganyi wrote *Mashangu's Reverie and Other Essays* (1977)³ "as a frivolous kind of 'self-analysis' and in this way started to rid myself of disturbing impulses." The "disturbing impulses" refer to what happens to the self "under conditions of subordination, the self that is projected in everyday life is false and unauthentic since it remains a mask protecting its double – an unnatural division which does violence to the integrity of the self."

We find Mashangu talking to his psychotherapist, Dr Davies, about his anguish, pain and anger about what it means to be black in a dehumanising world of white domination. Mashangu/Manganyi says to Dr Davies:

I...I was thinking of repudiation. You know what I mean? Repudiation. I was looking at my life since the days at the Mission School. It has been one big battle repudiating, negating something or other – myself, my culture, even my people. You see, we're forced to speak English on certain days at school. Mind you, not only to enable us to read Milton or Shakespeare at a later stage but to prepare us...to create a readiness to repudiate everything which was native to us. Can you visualise that...each one of us carries a double...a kind of replica of self that is always in conflict with the mask that faces the world. To protect this mask from its double, one cherished an illusion and nourished it – the illusion that the future and prosperity of the mask depends upon a negation of the past, both individual and collective...^{3(p.20)}

The beauty, pathos and agony of this paragraph captures Manganyi as a great writer and a profoundly incisive analyst of the deformations of black subjectivity. It is also alive to the possibilities and difficulties of liberating black subjectivity from the yoke of subjugation and racial domination. He was a de-colonial thinker in the mould of Frantz Fanon long before the currency of de-colonial thought took hold.

The second distinct area is Manganyi's work on memory, biography and exile. The biographies that he wrote explore the unfolding and dialectical intertwining of individual, social and historical consciousness. His first biography, published in 1983, was on Es'kia Mphahlele (1919–2008)⁴, the novelist and literary theorist. It is not insignificant that his three biographies are about black men. Except for Es'kia Mphahlele, who was a giant of (African) literature and recognised during his lifetime, the other two are artists – Gerard Sekoto and Dumile Feni. And not just artists, but artists living in exile, with Gerard Sekoto (1913–1993)⁵ mostly at peace with "becoming" a Frenchman, and Feni troubled by being away from home. Sadly, Dumile Feni (1939–1991)⁶ died suddenly just before he was planning to return to South Africa. Mphahlele was also an exile as an academic in the USA, but this was to some extent "voluntary". The exile experience is an experience of disruption and dislocation and has profound effects on psychological well-being. Manganyi's biographies show us the personal costs of (political) exile, and the struggle against being away from home, and how these memories both sustain and "torture" the exiles.

Thirdly, one can say that, from his first writings, there is an abiding interest in political violence. In Manganyi's early writings he is concerned with the effects of the violence of apartheid and racism on black subjectivity, and, in his later work, with the violence of the state in trials against people accused of "terrorism". Manganyi's expert witness testimonies are some of the most complex and sophisticated psycho-legal defences against the repressive political and legal apparatus of the apartheid state.

His work, in my view, also has a strong *moral* dimension to it, and this is particularly evident in his work on political violence (see the edited collection with André du Toit published in 1990)⁷, and his appearance as an expert witness

in political trials (see Chapters 5–7 of his memoir⁸). In his expert witness testimony, he was concerned to explain the complexities of the political acts (so-called political violence, or “terrorism”) in terms of the meaning of the lived experience of black subjectivity under apartheid, and the understandable (if not justifiable, for the state and its agents) resistance to oppression and exploitation.

Fourthly, besides his contribution to the life of ideas, he also unselfishly gave his expertise and wisdom to public institutions in South Africa, and, especially since 1994, held some highly prestigious appointments in educational and academic spheres: firstly as the Director-General of the national Department of Education (under Minister Sibusiso Bhengu in Mandela’s government); as a vice-chancellor of the University of the North; as both a vice-chancellor (1999–2003) and vice-principal (2003–2006) of the University of Pretoria; and as a chairperson of the Council on Higher Education.

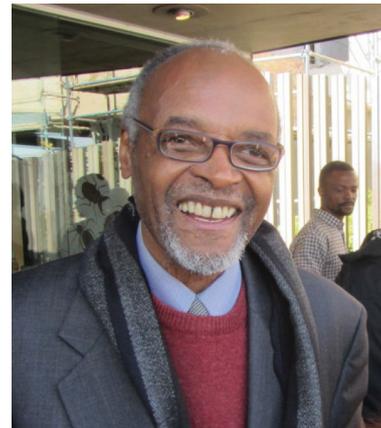
I would now like to make a few remarks about my personal relationship with Chabani, not out of any vain attempt to insinuate myself into the life of this remarkable South African intellectual and ‘man of letters’, but rather to show a side of him that not many people who have only read his work would have any inkling of. I also think Chabani would have approved of my reminiscences of our friendship.

My first encounter with Chabani Manganyi was with his first book, *Being-Black-in-the-World* published in 1973² and re-issued in 2019⁹. I did not read this book as part of any course in Psychology, but rather as a young academic and someone who had come through “white student politics” in NUSAS. *Being-Black-in-the-World*², a collection of essays on the “black experience” as Manganyi framed it back then, had a huge influence on a young generation of left-leaning, anti-apartheid, mostly white, aspiring academics and intellectuals. Saths Cooper, in his PsySSA video tribute to Manganyi, reminds us that he and other black student radicals were also significantly influenced by this book.

My next encounter with Manganyi was through my association as Editor of the journal *Psychology in Society* (PINS). PINS first introduced its readers to Manganyi in 1985 through a long critical essay by Cyril Couve¹⁰ (then at the University of Cape Town, and, at the time, an editor of PINS), entitled, ‘Psychology and politics in Manganyi’s work: A materialist critique’. This was followed by a review of Manganyi and du Toit’s 1990 edited collection, *Political violence and the struggle in South Africa*¹¹, by Etienne Marais (1992)¹². The last review of Manganyi’s work was by Leslie Swartz (1994)¹³ of *Treachery and Innocence* (1991)¹⁴. Other notable works of Manganyi’s were *Alienation and the Body in Racist Society: A Study of the Society that Invented Soweto* (1977)¹⁵; *Looking through the Keyhole: Dissenting Essays on the Black Experience* (1981)¹⁶; *A Black Man called Sekoto* (1996)¹⁷; *On Becoming a Democracy: Transition and Transformation in South African Society* (2004)¹⁸; and *Making Strange: Race Science and Ethnopsychiatric Discourse* (2018)¹⁹.

A 17-year gap transpired before PINS published anything on Manganyi again. Through the suggestion of Derek Hook (a PINS editor at the time), PINS published Manganyi’s brilliant essay ‘The violent reverie’. This essay had been published in Manganyi’s (1977)²⁰ collection entitled *Mashangu’s Reverie and Other Essays* by Ravan Press. I got permission from Ravan Press to re-publish this essay in PINS, but thought that it would be appropriate to contact the author himself. I emailed Chabani in 2010 asking for permission to re-publish his violent reverie essay, which he unhesitatingly gave to PINS. In his reply email, he asked that I phone him so that we could talk about this and mentioned that he preferred a *personal* touch in these matters! And so started a wonderful and rewarding intellectual and personal friendship with Chabani.

During 2011, Chabani contacted me about the memoir he was writing, the book that became *Apartheid and the Making of a Black Psychologist*⁸, published in 2016. He asked whether I would read what he had written thus far, and I gave him some comments and thoughts on the manuscript. Chabani clearly liked what I had said about his manuscript in its early stages, as he arranged for Wits University Press to appoint me as the academic editor of his book, which we then worked on for the next couple of years. From that time on until the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, we would see each other every couple of months,



Source: Wits University Press (reproduced with permission)

Professor Manganyi at the launch of his memoir, June 2016.

either because he was holidaying in the Durban area or because I was in Johannesburg. We would meet for lunch and Chabani liked not to be rushed. He ate slowly, spoke thoughtfully, and always wanted to linger and talk about ideas and politics.

The last time we met in Johannesburg he mentioned feeling old, he was then about to turn 80, and said that he probably had written his last book, meaning his memoir *Apartheid and the Making of a Black Psychologist*⁸. I wondered then whether he was ill and not wanting to be part of public life anymore. After our lunch we said goodbye and I watched as he walked away slowly from the restaurant – that was the last time I saw him.

Chabani Manganyi was a man who throughout his life pursued an independence of thought, and had a profound respect and love for the life of the mind. It was a privilege and a joy to know this gentle, principled man of letters as both an intellectual inspiration and a friend. I hope we keep alive the legacy of Chabani Manganyi’s work and ideas in the challenges that lie ahead as we consider what it means to live as free and compassionate human beings.

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