

Tracing the Passion of a Black Christ

*Accounting for the violent science of apartheid, as chronicled in the reimagined
Passion narrative of Sokhaya Charles Nkosi's 1976 Crucifixion*

Considered in this paper are the thirteen linocut prints of South African artist Sokhaya Charles Nkosi's *Crucifixion* series (1976). Reflecting the atmosphere of political unrest that followed the 1976 Soweto Uprising, the series is introduced as a secularised and politically provocative reworking of the Passion drama. In tracing the episodic sufferings of a black Christ, the series is demonstrated as chronicling in a veiled religious idiom what Njabulo Ndebele has described as the 'violent science' of apartheid – which is to say, the undisclosed violence of incarcerations and torture that sustained its social norm. The legislated exclusion of these biopolitical procedures is emphasised with reference to Giorgio Agamben's conception of *bare life* and the *relation of exception*, as well as Anthony Bogues' conception of the political nature of torture, in which the subjection of bodies to pain necessitates their exclusion from the public sphere. As the torture and murder of detained political activists in apartheid South Africa went largely undocumented, Nkosi's *Crucifixion* is presented as an important chronicling of apartheid violence – revealing, in a sequence of ostensibly religious images, procedures of torture enacted upon detained political activists by apartheid security forces. It is further argued that registered in the series is a radical redeployment of Christ's salvatory sufferings, whereby the pained and subjugated black body is reclaimed as a collective site of political agency and struggle. In this regard, the epitomic figure of Nkosi's incarcerated Christ is seen as embodying in his blackness, as well as in the ultimately victorious narrative of his suffering, the self-realisation and political emancipation advocated within both Black Consciousness and Black Theology. Recalling the culture of participative witness associated with devotional programmes like the *Via Dolorosa* and Stations of the Cross, it is proposed in conclusion that extended to viewers in the reimagined

narrative of Nkosi's *Crucifixion* is a certain imperative to imaginatively revisit and self-reflexively account for traumatic histories of black suffering and resistance.