

To Storm the Castles and Define the Happening



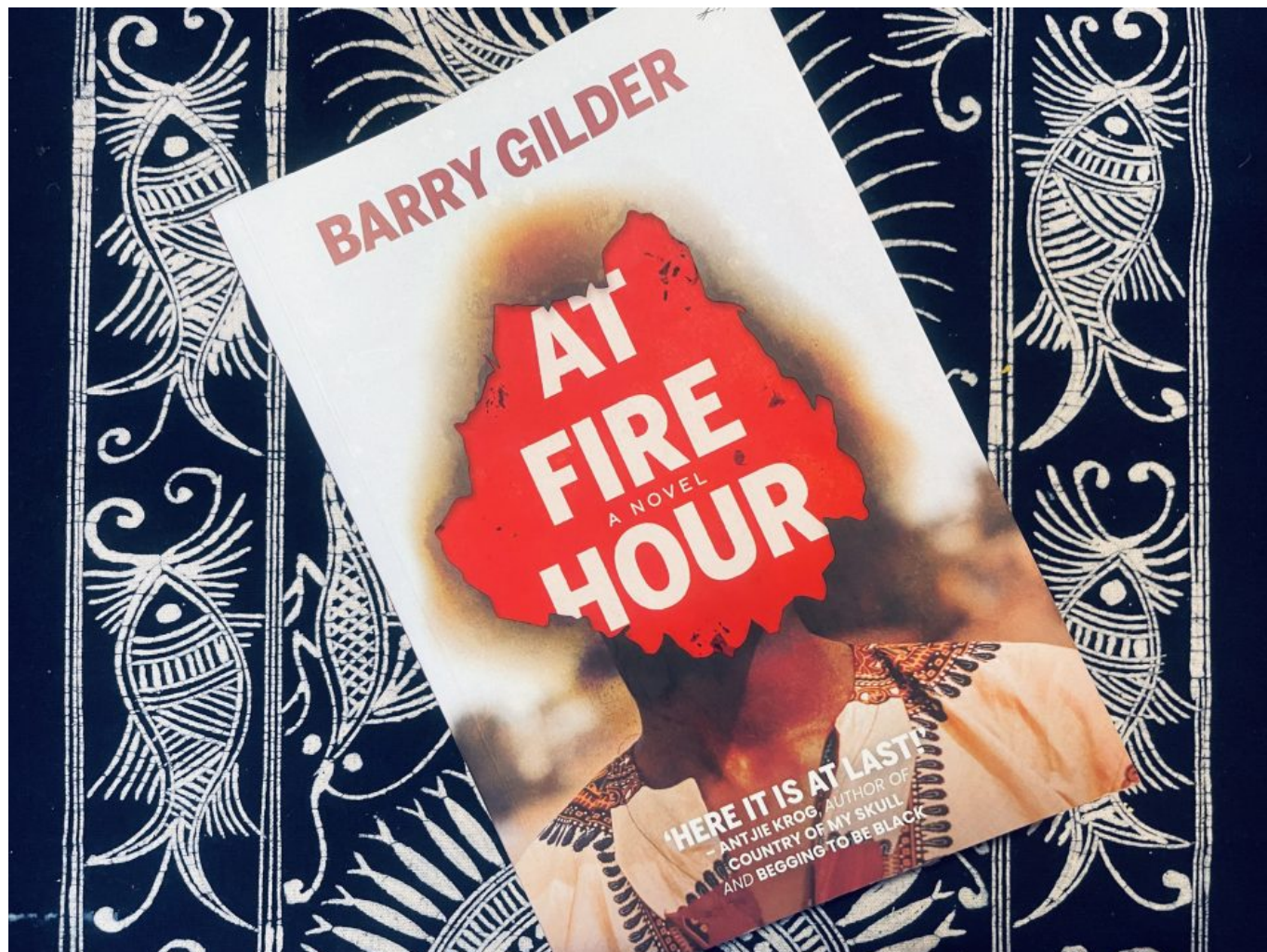
☒ Listen to Sobashiy' Abazali ('We Will Leave Our Parents') - African Cream Freedom Choir.

While you read our bulletin, we invite you to listen to *Sobashiy' Abazali* ('We Will Leave Our Parents'), a popular South African freedom song performed here by the African Cream Freedom Choir.

'There's a world, many worlds, in books, comrade,' Bheki told Spokes, an illiterate peasant from the Transkei. Spokes came from this homeland in southeastern South Africa created by the apartheid government, and overlapped with part of the ancestral homelands of the Xhosa people. It was January 1980 and Bheki and Spokes were training as part of uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), in a forest near the town of Quibaxe in Angola. In between military drills, there were literacy classes and cultural evenings where soldiers moonlighted as poets, singers, comedians, gumboot dancers, and other cultural workers.

This is the scene painted in *At Fire Hour*, the latest novel by Barry Gilder, who in the 1970s, as a young South African activist and cultural worker went into exile, later serving in the ANC underground leadership in

Botswana. After the advent of democracy, Gilder held senior government positions in the National Intelligence Agency and the Department of Home Affairs. When we spoke online about his new book, he had recently completed his tenure as the South African ambassador to Syria and Lebanon.



Cover of *At Fire Hour*.

'I went to Angola for military training in the same camp as my character, Bheki,' Gilder recounts. Following a similar trajectory as his own life, *At Fire Hour* tells the story of Bheki Makhathini, a young South African poet from the Black Consciousness Movement who joins the anti-apartheid struggle in exile. In the opening scene, we meet the protagonist describing the sound of an Afrikaner interrogator's boot pressed against his cheekbone. Slipping in and out of consciousness after prolonged torture and questioning, Bheki is finally released into uncertain circumstances which remain an open question throughout the novel. Though Bheki is a fictional character, the world he inhabits was not.

'I think it's important to tell our story, whether it's grand or not,' Gilder says. 'So, I used real places, real people, real events to make the context of the story as real as possible'. In the nearly 400-page novel, we follow Bheki to London, England, where he meets Alex La Guma, the renowned South African activist and the first recipient of the prestigious Lotus Prize for Literature from the Afro-Asian Writers Association. 'Comrade Alex' in his thick-framed glasses tells our young poet that in the midst of revolutionary struggle, 'there must

always be time to write, to record, to agitate'. The two are complementary, not contradictory, endeavours.

We are taken to the Moscow winter, where Bheki, wearing his Russian great coat and *shapka* ('fur hat'), undergoes further military and intelligence training. There, perhaps even more importantly, he discovers Russian literature, from Maxim Gorky and Dimitry Furmanov, Alexander Ostrovksy and Mikhail Sholokov, and 'mad [Vladimir] Mayakovsky' from whom he learns 'the art of the art of war'.



Barry Gilder performing at the Culture and Resistance Symposium, University of Botswana, 1982. Credit: Anna Erlandsson via Freedom Park.

In Gaborone, Botswana, we find ourselves in the garage of a 'leave house', a place used as temporary shelter for underground movements. There, seated amongst painting supplies, we meet Thamsanqa 'Thami' Mnyele, a member of the Medu Art Ensemble cultural collective of exiled South African and internationalist activists founded in the Botswana capital. In real life, Mnyele was assassinated during one of the early morning raids by South African Defence Force soldiers in 1985, which targeted the collective's members. In the world of the novel, however, Mnyele is still very much alive, contemplating a new artwork, an homage to MK guerrillas and the 3,000 Zulu warriors slaughtered by the Boers in the 1838 Battle of Blood River. Throughout the novel we meet other painters, musicians, writers, graphic designers, and actors of the Medu Art Ensemble.

Though existing only for six short years, Medu made remarkable achievements, highlighted by the 1982 Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival that brought together hundreds, if not thousands, of exiled and 'inziled' cultural workers to discuss the essential role of culture in accelerating the struggle for South African liberation. In Gilder's novel, this fertile cultural moment, where liberation was palpable and becoming more imminent each day, is brought to life. At Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, we dived into the history of Medu in our **Dossier no. 71**, *Culture as a Weapon of Struggle: The Medu Art Ensemble and Southern African Liberation*.



DOSSIER N° 71

CULTURE AS A WEAPON OF STRUGGLE

THE MEDU ART ENSEMBLE
AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN
LIBERATION

More than an account of life in exile or even the anti-apartheid struggle, *At Fire Hour* contemplates the role of art and culture in political struggle, and in particular, revolutionary literature. The book's dedication reveals as much: it features Alex La Guma, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Thami Mnyele, James Madhlope Phillips, Jonas Gwangwa, Lindiwe Mabuza, and all the South African activist-artists no longer with us who 'stormed the castles and defined the happening'. The quote references the poem, 'Native's Letter', by South African poet Arthur Nortje, from which the novel gets its name. It serves as an affirmation – an insistence – that artists must be embedded in the struggle, and at the same time, must live to tell its stories:

and let no amnesia
attack at fire hour:

for some of us must storm the castles
some define the happening

Indeed, Gilder, like his protagonist Bheki, and all the politically committed artists who fought to bring an end to the apartheid regime ‘stormed the castles’ as well as ‘defined the happening’. *At Fire Hour* devotes itself to this continual work of defining all that happened for current and future generations of revolutionaries.

Five decades have passed since Bheki and Gilder went into exile, and this year marks three decades since the first democratic elections in South Africa took place. Just two months ago in the 2024 general elections, the ANC secured only 40 per cent of the total vote, losing its parliamentary majority for the first time ever, revealing a divided country with deepening social and economic crises. For much of the working class and African majority who remain economically marginalised, landless, and dispossessed, the promises of democratisation have yet to be delivered thirty years on.

Reflecting back to the twilight of apartheid rule, Gilder remembers, ‘We were still imagining that we would march into Pretoria on top of Soviet tanks’. However, democratic South Africa was also born out of the ashes of the Soviet Union, which he says, did not ‘collapse’ but ‘was collapsed’. Gilder describes the negotiated ‘peaceful transition to democracy’ in South Africa as a loss of the revolutionary dream for which communists had fought. ‘And so it was more than a loss of hope. We came into a situation where our Marxism and our communism were lost. I was and remain a communist.’

Bheki mourns this loss in his final poem:

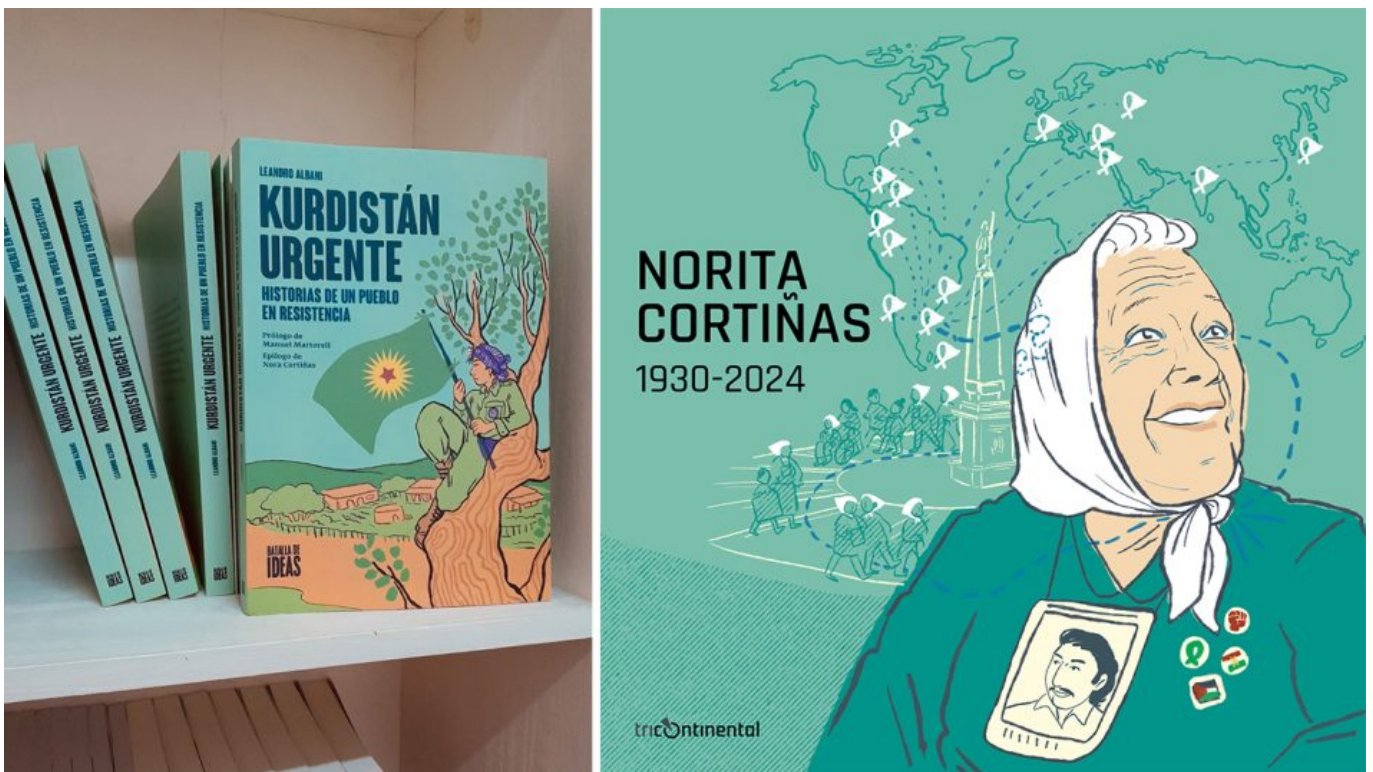
‘ngitshela ukuthi safelani?’
tell me brothers
what did we die for?
who will find our bones
take them home?
where is the poet
who led and left us here?
what song does he now sing
if he still sings
is it the song of the new wind that
whispers through the acacias
that shade us
a song of negotiation
reconciliation
capitulation?

However uncertain the domestic political situation is in his country, Gilder remains optimistic about our present and the new winds blowing across the Global South. When he was sent to Damascus to assume the ambassador’s post, he was aware of going ‘to the eye of the global storm’ where a big shift was underway. He continued:

We're going to win because the obvious hypocrisy of the West in relation to Palestine, in relation to Ukraine, in relation to everything is becoming so obvious even to their own populations. I think we are on the brink of something. I don't know what it is, ideologically speaking, but it's more people centred and anti-capitalist in a broad sense.

We are not quite at fire hour, but the new winds are blowing. The bones of fallen comrades are calling us to fight against amnesia, to continue sharing their stories of peoples and nations struggling to be born. For that, we need poets more than ever, to sing us a new song, to lead us on the unfinished path, and tell our unfinished story.

In Other News...



The cover of *Kurdistan Urgente* by Leandro Albani (Argentina) and our TBT of Norita Cortiñas.

Batalla de Ideas (Argentina) has just published *Kurdistan Urgente* by Leandro Albani, featuring cover design by our art department's Dani Ruggeri, inspired by the experiences in the Jinwar village, identity, land, and community. The book carries an epilogue of the co-founder of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo ('The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo'), Norita Cortiñas (1930–2024), whose life we recently honoured in this portrait.



Red Books Day poster for July by Vanshika Babbar (India).

This month's Red Books Day poster is by Vanshika Babbar, inspired by *Halla Bol: The Death and Life of Safdar Hashmi*, a book by Sudhanva Deshpande and published by LeftWord Books (India). *Halla Bol*, meaning 'raise hell', recounts the life and work of Hashmi, co-founder of popular theatre group, Jana Natya Manch (Janam), who died after reactionary thugs launched an attack during a street performance for workers in 1989. Instead of cowering, the theatre troupe, including Deshpande, returned the next day to finish the play that was violently interrupted. Janam continues to produce theatre for working people today. Both books were released by publishers in the International Union of Left Publishers, which participated earlier this month at the International Book Fair in Caracas, Venezuela.



Several book covers created by our art team could be found at the International Book Fair in Caracas.

‘Theatre is make-believe; theatre is life’, Deshpande writes on the opening page. ‘It is ephemeral, momentary, fleeting, transient, a wisp of smoke... And it sometimes reeks of blood. The blood spilled on the brick-paved streets of a working-class neighbourhood on a perfect winter Sunday morning. This is not a story of death. It is a story of life. The luminous life of Safdar Hashmi, extraordinary in all its ordinariness.’

This month’s art bulletin is dedicated to revolutionary artists from Safdar Hashmi to Thami Mnyele who encourage us to continue to ‘raise hell’ through our politically committed art.

Warmly,

Tings Chak

Art director, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

P.S. Our monthly bulletin is now published in **English, Spanish, and Portuguese**. Please do subscribe using the embedded links and share.