

Nakasa does not deserve to be shoved into any box

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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Nat Nakasa would have been bemused. He would be pleased to be brought back to home soil at last, almost 50 years after he died in New York. But I imagine he would have been bewildered by some of the things said in recent weeks about him and what he represents in our country's journalistic and cultural history.

The talented young journalist, who left on an exit permit in 1964 to take up a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University and threw himself from a window in despair at becoming stateless, would have wondered why he was being welcomed home last month at King Shaka International Airport by a procession of Umkhonto we Sizwe veterans. Who is this person being wrapped in all the clichés of struggle, he would have asked? Why am I - a free journalistic spirit - being embraced by those who have been pushing for greater control of the media?

Reinforcing journalistic views

Disparate interests have always laid claim to Nakasa. The apartheid authorities labelled him a communist in the banning order they had prepared for him when he took an exit permit out of the country. The US authorities saw him as a bulwark against radicalism as the Central Intelligence Agency secretly (and without his knowing) funded his journal, *The Classic*.

Now in his death and return home, everyone is using him to reinforce their view of what journalism was then and what it needs to be now. In a speech a while back at the South African National Editors' Forum award given in his name, President Jacob Zuma called him courageous and an "outstanding patriot" who "played a key role in shaping society". In a media release for Heritage Month, it was said that his life story promoted something called "constructive national discourse".

When it gave him the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver in 2007, the Presidency dressed him in Rainbow Nation colours. It cited him as "an embodiment of nonracism" whose journal fostered "a spirit of empathy and mutual understanding". How does the African National Congress embrace a man who had such moderate views in the turmoil of 1963?

Free thinker

Speaking at this year's Nat Nakasa Award event, Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa came closer to the complicated truth of what sort of person Nakasa was when he spoke of "a free thinker, who did not easily fit into any box" and who wrote from "an individual and quite idiosyncratic perspective". It was a speech in which he invited journalists to be critical and independent.

Press Council head Joe Thlooe recently commented on how Nakasa was not typical of the journalists of the Drum era. He

hardly drank, for example. Another contemporary laughed at the fact that he had arrived in Johannesburg from Durban with a tennis racquet, of all things. Despite being claimed as an anti-apartheid writer, his work was more detached and formal than that of most of his colleagues. His most powerful mode was irony, not a common feature of struggle literature. He is sometimes placed in the community of exiles, but he does not fit this bill easily as he left not to join a political or military organisation but to further his writing career.

City Press described him as "sardonic, sharp-tongued and mischievous". And don't forget, poet Pippa Yaa de Villiers said at the University of the Witwatersrand journalism programme's tribute evening last week, he did it with perfect syntax.

What Nakasa represents

Nakasa would not have criticised those who were laying claim to his heritage. He would have stepped back and watched with the detached gaze of much of his writing. He would have described it matter-of-factly, adopting the language of those who were calling him a "hero" and a "stalwart" with just a touch of irony, leaving us guessing whether he was being appreciative or satirical. That was his way, and it is part of the reason there has been so much contestation over what he has come to represent.

By trying to fit him into one of our boxes, by trying to make him serve our purposes, we denude him of real meaning. We need to embrace him for what he was: complex, ambiguous, independent, talented and ambitious. A writer, reporter and Joburg flaneur. To remember him that way is to pay him real respect.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

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