

## “It’s Difficult to Decide My Identity”: A Re-Evaluation of the Life, Career and Legacy of Black South African Journalist Nat Nakasa (1937-1965) (Jaron Murphy)

### Abstract

This paper seeks, firstly, to generate increased international awareness of the little-known yet remarkable life and career of black South African journalist, Nat Nakasa. Awarded a prestigious Nieman Fellowship in 1964 to read journalism at Harvard University in the United States, his application for a passport was refused by the apartheid authorities. He left South Africa on a no-return exit permit instead, effectively going into exile and thus becoming, in his own words, “a native of nowhere” (Patel 1975, p111). Tragically, he died in mysterious circumstances in New York City in 1965, aged just 28: his fall from the seventh floor of a skyscraper was officially deemed an apparent suicide but was also questioned, including by his family, as possible murder. Yet in the decades since, scholarly attention to Nakasa has been meagre. Except for a smattering of books, newspaper articles and historical entries about him, he has disappeared into obscurity as a largely forgotten anti-apartheid figure who showed promise as a journalist but suffered an untimely death in a bygone era of 20<sup>th</sup>-century politics and journalism. While there have been efforts in post-apartheid South Africa to keep his memory alive, mainly through the South African National Editors’ Forum’s annual Nat Nakasa Journalism Awards which, since 1998, have honoured “bravery, courage, and integrity in journalism” (SANEF 2024), the significance and details of his life and work remain sorely under-researched, under-circulated to wider audiences, and therefore under-appreciated. Even in South Africa, recognition of his name in connection with the awards seldom equates to acquaintance with his body of work and array of talents as a writer and editor. Internationally, he continues to be almost completely unknown. In this context, this paper also seeks, secondly, to offer a structured re-evaluation of Nakasa’s life, career and legacy by expressly drawing on evidence from his work for such publications as *The Rand Daily Mail*, *Drum*, *The Classic* and *The New York Times*. A hallmark of this paper is its appraisal and celebration of Nakasa as a literary journalist of distinction who powerfully conveyed his lived experiences and struggled to define his identity in and beyond apartheid South Africa. Thirdly, as the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nakasa’s death approaches in July 2025, this paper seeks to present a case for the ongoing relevance and importance of Nakasa to journalism education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This portion of the paper is augmented by the author’s personal reflections on training and starting out as a working journalist in the city of Durban, near where Nakasa was born in 1937 and his remains were returned in 2014.

### Bio

Jaron Murphy received national awards for investigative and hard news journalism in South Africa in the late 1990s. His journalism career, consisting mostly of senior editorial, production and management roles across print and digital news, has extended from South Africa to Ireland and the UK. In 2018, he appeared on the list of the 238 most respected journalists following research commissioned by the UK’s National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ). Journalists working in the UK and Ireland were asked “which living journalist” they felt most embodied the values of journalism that they respected and adhered to. He holds a DPhil in Literature from the University of Oxford. He is currently Principal Academic in Communication, Journalism and Literature at the University of Bournemouth where he is also the BA (Hons) Communication and Media Programme Leader.