

Dancing with Mountains

Malika Lueen Ndlovu

Arts in Psychosocial Support CoP, South Africa
anchor@malikaspeaks.co.za

Abstract

Poetry informed by indigenous knowledge systems, whether written, spoken or heard, offers ideal pathways for healing and transformation. Being “medicine” in the broadest non-clinical sense, it is deeply restorative as activism, as caregiving practice and as balm in the face of relentless assaults on our bodies and beings. This I exemplify in my own work alongside a range of South African poets and poetry educators, authors, healers and (arts and/or education) activists with the hope of inspiring further research and documentation of such work.

Keywords: poetry as healing/medicine; applied poetry; decolonial poetry education



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Introduction¹

Layers and Lenses

My transdisciplinary approach in this article is a weaving of personal narrative, poetic analysis, poetry and applied-arts thinking in a dance with bodies of work that speak to decolonisation and transformation. I propose that poetry is a substantially effective methodology for decolonial activism, particularly in the educational domain, and that poetry itself can be a profoundly rich expression of decoloniality. It must be stated that poetry is used in this article to allow poetry to speak for itself and centralise the art form as equal to academic analysis in terms of sense and meaning-making. It is a form of enquiry and not merely creative embroidery around left-brain ideas and concepts. Is poetry not by its very nature r-evolutionary in shifting the ways we see, feel or consider the world around us, each other, as well as the unseen, the not yet manifest, the dream-sphere?

The world we want is one where many worlds fit. (Zapatistas)²

As an arts activist coming of age during South Africa's transition from apartheid state to democracy, I found intimate resonance with Hazel Carby's³ account:

I found the process of actually writing [the book] to be an excavation of sorts. I found myself thinking of terms like "archaeologist". I had the feeling of moving through layers, not just of history, but the layers of being and becoming in the world that have accrued to us over time and that need to be peeled away level by level. (2020)

This article, like much of my writing, may turn out to be another dig into a terrain that has so much hidden, buried and forgotten within it. Yet each time I write and speak in my own voice against a mammoth and traumatic South African past, I am progressing on the liberation journey. I believe it is so for many of us as descendants of the oppressed, marginalised, erased or silenced. To advance this initial tilling of the soil on the subject of "Decoloniality in/and Poetry", I offer an extract from my archaeological and ancestral poem, "Lydia in the Wind":⁴

¹ The title of this article is drawn from the Emergence Network's recurring course title, We Will Dance with Mountains (<http://course.bayoakomolafe.net/>).

² Formed in the early twentieth century, the Zapatistas are a libertarian-socialist political and militant group whose ultimate goal was to convince the Mexican government to rewrite the constitution to include protection of indigenous rights and autonomy.

³ Carby is a foundational scholar of "race", class, and empire as critical lenses for understanding culture.

⁴ "Lydia in the Wind" is dedicated to the spirit of enslaved woman Lydia "Ou Tamaletjie" Williams, who died on 16 June 1910. It was first performed by Malika Lueen Ndlovu, with music by Khoi San heritage activist and visual artist Garth Erasmus, as an offsite event of the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions. Part of a painted banner portrait of Lydia Williams produced by Garth Erasmus for the District Six Museum, the poem was also published in *Slaves at the Cape: A Guidebook for Beginner Researchers* by Carohn Cornell (2000).

(Sung) *If we do not know—are we free?*
How can we be?

She is held captive once again
this time by a broken chain of events
our degrees of amnesia
the root of her dis-ease

Her feet are bleeding
from this haunting dance of grief
she will only know relief
when all our ghosts are put to rest
when their stories are re-collected
returned to their place of honour
recorded in our history
embedded in our memory

(Sung) *Bring in the light of consciousness*
Who was she?
Who were they?
Who are we?

And with this unveiling
we see the true dimensions
to this family
we are unearthing the path
of recovery

And in the questioning
comes the who am I
out of the listening
comes through you am I
through you am I

I have structured the article into two encompassing themes. The first, *Digging Close to Home*, reflects upon a personal and wider socio-political past, surfaces current scenarios, accomplishments and areas of redress within the contemporary poetry domain towards transforming or enriching poetry education in South Africa. The second theme, *Poetry as Homecoming and Healing*, zones in on what has unfolded in recent times with regard to poetry as decolonial and therapeutic practice, as well as motivating for further research and promotion of this applied-arts form.

Digging Close to Home

uGogo Grace Lee Boggs⁵ states: “transform yourself to transform the world”. To me, this means that, in order to engage effectively in decolonial work in South Africa and the world, we must also conduct inward decolonial work, decolonising ourselves. Acclaimed South African poet Phillippa Yaa de Villiers’s poem, “Come Back Afrika”, expresses how intimate and unsettling yet liberating such excavation can be.

My ancestors were fishermen and fishwives,
on my father’s side
loud-mouthed, big-bottomed Ghanaians.

When I asked my father about our culture,
I wanted to know
the beats that would lead my feet
in the ways of our people and he said:
culture? Well, your grandfather played the violin
and the harpsichord.

When I asked my father
why why why did they let go of
all that rich history that Afrika gave us?

He said:
my dear
we are Africans.
Anyone looking at us can see how black we are,
why do we have to be going on and on about it?
Like Kwame Nkrumah
I am freedom’s child
and my pride
is in every molecule of my being.
I am not oppressed.
Why sing that song when I have broken those chains
and stand before you as a free man?

He’s deep, my father.
Maybe deep
in denial.
But maybe
Afrika is dreaming
like the world is dreaming,
and Afrika is bluesing
like the world is bluesing,

⁵ Chinese-American Grace Lee Boggs spent much of her life advocating for civil rights and labour rights and was a noted figure in Detroit’s Black Power movement.

and it's beautiful
live as a runaway chicken,
as a newborn goat trying out its new knees,
Afrika is the whole world's starving child
and the universe's wise grandmother,
Afrikans are dressing up in fantasies
and walking out of the villages and into
the cities and out of the cities
and back to the villages, via the
cave and the beach and the mountain
and the moon.

There is no limit.
There is no boundary.
(de Villiers 2008, 72–73)

The expansive last stanza and concluding two lines of this poem speak to how decolonial efforts require the resources of courageous vulnerability and recognition of the limitless ways we can think. Breaking away from our oppressive and brainwashing past, this involves consciously freeing and daring ourselves to join the dots and stitch together the visionary thought tapestries we want to see manifest as change, in our lives, our country and beyond. At the heart of this article is poetry and alongside it, the learning resource and transformative power of personal story.

Shaping Influences

I grew up in Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal), not-so-fondly known as “the last outpost of the British Empire”. Central to my mixed ancestry was a Xhosa maternal grandmother from Kokstad in the Eastern Cape and a maternal grandfather born around 1920 in Mangete, Zululand. He was a direct descendant of King Cetshwayo's Scottish military advisor, “the great” John Dunn, with his many (mostly nameless) Zulu wives. I was born under apartheid in 1971; classified Coloured; English was my first language. At the primary school in my Coloured neighbourhood under the 1950 Group Areas Act, poetry was taught to me by Coloured teachers who saw a good grasp of the English language and an aspirant British accent, not only as a sign of intelligence, but social status. They were not at all critical of (or free to criticise) the colonial curriculum being taught. In Grade 4 (then called Standard 2) I was a 10-year-old brown girl with minimal awareness of my African-ness; I had consistently straightened hair and I was surrounded by a light-wealthy-and-white-aspirant mentality, paired with a shaming or denial of blackness by almost everyone around me. The religious literature I was being raised on included Helen Steiner-Rice greeting card poetry, narrative gospel music, the lyrics of 1960s and 1970s international musicians and bands my parents listened to (on 8-track tapes and vinyl LPs): this was my early literary diet and inspiration. Alongside the constant encouragement to read, these sources cultivated my early love affair with words and storytelling through poetry and song. In my teens these mostly Western “foreign” cultural influences were replaced by late 1980s American R&B and pop

music, impacting my teen romantic and lyrical notions. The philosophical themes I was drawn to were heavily influenced by my Catholic biblical upbringing and typically adolescent questioning of the meaning of life, including religion or God's place and role in all of it. My high school poetry diet was made richer by my bursary-funded migration, aged 16 in Grade 10, to a private all-girls convent school. It was a transformative learning environment, with a building perched on a green hill overlooking the Durban harbour in a white middle-class suburb and it attempted multi- (not yet non-) racial education.

The well-worn poetry "bible" at the time was *New Inscapes*, first published in 1969 by Oxford University Press in South Africa and designed for South African senior high school students. This publication and a scattering of individual collections from the school library provided my heaviest infusion of English poetry, from dense classics such as Chaucer, John Donne, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare, Pope, Shelley, Keats, Frost and Wordsworth to modern poetry by acknowledged "masters" such as Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and e e cummings. These three rule-breaking poets, with their dark moods, were the type I found most attractive. They matched my teenage existential-depressive state and spurred my first poems emulating their style, bearing an emotional gravity that I only dared share with a few, lest anyone try to "save me". I believe this is my first experience of writing (poetry and journaling) as therapeutic practice. Finally I had a place for my "identity crisis" questions. Finally I had found an outlet for my heavy-hearted responses to the bizarre contradiction of life under apartheid, growing more vividly violent to me with the State of Emergency imposed in the 1980s. My life still seemed privileged and relatively untouched by the realities that my peers were experiencing in "distant" townships like Kwa Mashu, nearby Cato Manor or Claremont on the Durban South Coast, let alone compared to youth on the Cape Flats. I, as one of the quota of brown girls in a newly "multi-racial" private school, could express my guilt, shame and unbelonging, as well as the anxiety at outgrowing places where I once felt at home. Through poetry I could also expel the less obvious pain of what we would today call micro-aggressions and even fantasise about suicide as the ultimate liberation from the world's woes.

I started a Performing Arts diploma at the then Natal Technikon (now Durban University of Technology—Biko Campus) in 1991. I was feasting on protest poetry now and the tide of South African voices, including Mongane Wally Serote, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Mazisi Kunene, Gcina Mhlope, Pascal Mafika Gwala, Breyten Breytenbach, Alan Paton, Antjie Krog, Ingrid De Kok, Ari Sitas and Shabbir Banoobhai. My mostly British childhood influences took a quantum leap towards African-American voices such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. This initial injection of black women's voices would later lead me to performative styles such as that of Ntozake Shange, the lyricism, scathing wit and social commentary of Caribbean writers Lorna Goodison and Linton Kwesi Johnson. I was exposed decades later to Dionne Brand and the legendary Audre Lorde.

In 1998, having relocated to Cape Town, where another exponential leap in my growth as a writer and poet was to unfold, I was invited back to my hometown for the biggest international poetry event in the country: Poetry Africa. In the festival line-up, as had been the case on several stages before I left Durban, I was the only woman of colour (Coloured poets were even rarer). I would share the stage with Gabeba Baderoon⁶ only in 2005 when I returned to the festival. At that point in my mid- to late twenties, on my journey with poetry, I had never read the work of a Coloured poet, besides a handful of poems by Adam Small, Arthur Nortje and James Matthews in school curricula. Only more than a decade later would I realise how diminished these legends had been when I first encountered their work under apartheid schooling. I had never met a Coloured woman poet, let alone one of my generation, until I moved to the Western Cape in late 1996. On most professional poetry platforms prior to this move, I felt viscerally like an anomaly, as my poem “born in africa but” concisely unpacks:

*Every story knows its teller
Every story has its time*

born in africa but
breastfed another mother tongue
put to sleep on foreign lullabies
praying for a jesus-heaven
when i die

born in africa but
into a designated cultivated patch
flung far from the indigenous tree
strategy for carving out my destiny

born in africa but
mixed equals inferior,
rearrange that exterior
scorned for the secret
exposed by my skin
enslaving beliefs
this child was bathed in

born in africa but
i have died to
the hiding
dividing
fearful deciding
of what i am
who i should be

⁶ Baderoon was also classified as “Coloured”.

born in africa but
a self made prisoner
i release captivity
i am free to unfold the sacred map
no other will dictate my individual destiny
born in africa but
living before and beyond
a universe awakens in me
(Ndlovu 2000, 11)

Liberating Our Tongues and Ourselves

My years of engagement with fellow Black writers and poets across the country bear pain-filled resonances relating to our formative years. The Eurocentric and Western canon as our first introduction to what poetry looks and sounds like, presented as ultimate and superior, left its lingering impact on entire generations of Black South Africans, including those historically classified Coloured and Indian. My sense of self, identity and political education evolved with further exposure to the oceans of Black poets and poetry on the continent and its diaspora. Living in the Western Cape and studying in the Netherlands, on excursions to the United States of America (USA) and other countries, I consciously embraced Black Consciousness. I dumped the painful and cumbersome label “Coloured” as relevant to me personally, although I still accept and respect it as a historical part of my identity and early conditioning. I value its resonances with the complexities of people of mixed descent all over the world and I know this is an ongoing healing and self-dis/recovery process for many. Those who have lived it know the trauma and psychological struggle located more deeply than superficial shifts in political alliances.

In an essay “Searching for Women Like Me: Coloured Identity, Afrikaans, Poetry and Performance”, Tereska Muishond decribes the time of forming a collective known as !Bushwomen:

We combined poetry with song and dance and were well received by our audiences. I noticed, however, that I was the only one speaking on Coloured identity. It certainly didn't help matters that the oppressor's language was my mother tongue. I felt like an alien in my own country and was in desperate need of a place of belonging. (2019, 143–44)

She goes on to expound on her evolving identity and the psycho-emotional release of poetry: here, though, I want to highlight her relationship with Afrikaans. In an extract from a poem written in 1998, she expresses another layer of colonial violence by the Dutch and the Afrikaner, who tried to erase enslaved and indigenous Khoi and San peoples' contributions to this South African language:

My mother speaks a “borrowed” tongue
Its intonations and inflections I suckled from her breast

My father speaks the tongue of a proud Griqua man
Rich with wisdom and humility
But neither xi nor xê

But I speak an alien tongue
Beautiful to hear
Its sovereignty bragging in my ear

...

Ashamed to speak my own
Afraid to make myself known
Despite feeling disjointed
Alone

(Muishond 2019, 148)

The assumption that all people historically classified as Coloured share an oversimplified and homogeneous racial identity (“black and white makes brown”) and speak Afrikaans as a mother tongue is pervasive, offensive and simply not true. Yet it would be a glaring omission if I did not mention language here. It would also overlook the extraordinary healing and decolonial work that poets as cultural activists have done and continue to do through and beyond their use of poetry, often in multimodal forms incorporating performance, music and visual art. They have been reclaiming and preserving indigenous cultural practices, and language is a central part of these. This topic deserves in-depth commentary, but within the scope of this article, I only have space to honour a few poets, such as Tereska Muishond, who make a substantial difference to “affected” communities and address toxic national narratives that perpetuate silencing, erasure and inferiority around Colouredness. I have learnt much in this regard from the work of longtime arts activists Emile Jansen of Black Noise; Jethro Louw, Garth Erasmus and Glen Arendse of Khoi Khonnexion; Nama Xam, Zenzile Khoisan, Collin “the Bushman” Meyer, Quintin “Jitsvinger” Goliath, Janine “Blaq Pearl” Van Rooi; also, those who gave birth to the *Afrikaaps!* production and educational programme: Adrian “Diff” Van Wyk (co-founder of InZync Poetry Sessions); the well-known Khadija Tracey Heeger; our national treasure Diana Ferrus; as well as more recent potent voices such as Shermoney Rhode and Jolyn Phillips. To conclude this focus on language and identity as part of “digging close to home”, I have brought two poetry extracts into conversation with each other. The extracts come from Xhosa poet Ongezwa Mbele’s poem, “Colonization: Twisting of the Tongue” (2018, 41) and Soweto-born Mandi “Poefficient” Vundla’s poem “Bloody Alphabet” (2018):

ONGEZWA:

In this new school, we will learn to
twist and twang and coil
Our tongues to utter and clutter the
English
And no one will tell us
how the English language
invaded our land
invaded the unfamiliar bend of our
tongues

Speaking English will require us
to breathe from our noses
as if our living and progress
depended on it
It will be like exercising in a boot
camp
the English will scrap the Xhosa
from my palate
and be in battle with the Zulu
warriors of
Cabanga
Cacisa
Cula
Cokama
Cela
-

We will be the sacrificial lambs
to the acrobatics of linguistics
of bilingualism
of trilingualism
of code switching
while the English speak *only* speak
and learn their English
and pass their English with
distinctions
(Mbele 2018, 41)

MANDI:

When you preserve your language
Do you remember there is blood in
your alphabet?
Do you wipe your mouth when you
speak?
Do you need a noose to make the letters
'o' and 'p'
Because 'd' has always been for us
dogs
The power of white chalk on black
boards
Turns our pain into silent letters
You don't pronounce it
But you see it is there
When I was learning to speak like them
My teacher said 'm' is for monkey
I never knew that monkey was for me
That 'o' is for an ocean tied with a
noose
That classrooms are a lesson on
drowning
When they do not teach you to swim
In your language in pre-school
(Vundla 2018)

Through my own poetry and the work of other poets, it is possible to detect the ways in which the colonial agenda, through language, has shaped many of us in harmful ways we dare to name, confront, and heal from. Voicing these wounds and truths is a courageous self-liberation and recovery of ourselves, and who we truly are cannot be reduced to melanin, geographical location or exclusive ancestry. Neither can we be pinned down to purist or supremacist notions of language and static culture or suffocated by the narrow and violent politics of othering. Having exposed the colonial institutions and curricula that fundamentally shaped my relationship with poetry, my personal story

also illustrated how I inherited the English language as a mother tongue. English may be my first language, but poetry is my mother tongue. Poetry is my home language—the language in which I feel most at home, in my skin and in my spirit.

Surfacing Poetry Histories and Witnessing the Shifts

From historical poetry schooling and publishing movements as old as, for example, COSAW⁷ and CWLP's⁸ worker-centred activism, a plethora of writing workshops and retreats for local writers enabled tides of poetry to unfurl that spoke of a liberated future (not yet manifest in the 1980s). With independent publishing houses, such as iconic activist and poet James Matthews's BLAC (Black Literature, Art and Culture) in the late 1970s, Ravan Press's South African literary and arts magazine *Staffrider*, published from 1978 to 1993, and the famous *Drum* magazine, our future imagineers found expression and gave life-saving inspiration to many. Fast-forwarding and building on such legacies, historically Black universities hosted numerous events on campuses across the country that combined political mobilisation, public speaking, struggle debate and strategy. More often than not, these were also cultural events where poetry had a vital role to play in rallying activism, strategic transformation and offering a promotional platform to poets who would otherwise have remained invisible and silenced.

Then came the 1990s wave of efforts, with progressive educators in government schools exposing learners to “extracurricular” materials and local poetry by Black writers, whose work was generally not prescribed in schools or banned by the oppressive state as “propaganda”. They began inviting poets and writers into school halls and classrooms to read and perform their poetry, to run creative writing workshops and youth poetry competitions. Some were elders (living archives⁹) and some were fiery young role models. While the celebrated and widely published South African poets of the time remained predominantly white, male and of English descent, the crosscurrents of change could not be stopped. They gave birth to many poetry groups, with the steady rise of Black voices and Black women's voices in particular. WEAVE (Women's Education and Artistic Voice Expression), rooted in Cape Town, and later Johannesburg-based Feelah Sista! were female-led poetry collectives and game-changers of the era. Established publishing houses were recognising the gap in the market for Black voices to be included in South African anthologies, with younger voices finding visibility here and growing audiences for live poetry events at arts and poetry festivals, both within

⁷ The Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) is a South African grassroots writers' organisation launched in July 1987. Its initial aims were to promote literature and redress the imbalances of apartheid education.

⁸ The Culture and Working Life Project (CWLP) started in 1985 to train workers in drama, music and literature, working closely with the trade unions to organise cultural events, establish cultural structures and document cultural activity.

⁹ See D'Abdon, Byrne and Newfield (forthcoming).

and beyond the country's borders. There were also many independent publishing initiatives during the late 1990s and early 2000s, an increasing number of self-publishing poets, who could not wait for historically colonial and apartheid publishing houses to embrace their offerings. Many poets used self-publishing as an act of defiance and agency, for example WEAVE's *Ink@Boiling Point: A 21st Century Selection of Black Women's Writing from the Southern Tip of Africa*,¹⁰ which was published by the collective in 2000 and sold over 1 000 copies. Black women poets used poetry readings, stage productions, and culture, heritage and education events to promote and distribute their work and to encourage women to claim their voices by writing. In *Our Words, Our Worlds: Writing on Black South African Women Poets, 2000–2018*, editor and poet Makhosazana Xaba also significantly points out:

Black women conceptualized- and -led publishing initiatives are the most recent trajectory in the publishing industry, one that challenges patriarchy and racism at the broad political levels. Through their publishing houses these women are changing the texture of the publishing industry. (2019, 50)

Xaba mentions Rose Francis's African Perspectives Publishing, Diana Ferrus Publishers, Ntateko Masinga's Nsuku Publishing Consultancy, Vangi Gantsho and Sarah Godsell's Impepho Press, JahRose's PeoPress, Flow Wellington's Poetree Publications, duduzile zamantungwa mabaso's Poetry Potion (now including podcasts) and Tembeka Mbobo's Women in Writing. The works published by these publishing houses are evidence of indigenous poetry content being purchased and digested in print or digital format, as part of an informal curriculum: not just recreational reading. South Africa's poetry publishing history is an entire body of work that cannot be summarised here. It suffices to say that the most popular and skilled young professional poets, writers and poetry educators of this democratic era are standing on the shoulders of many. Whether they know or explicitly honour the poets whose legacies they are building upon, and what access they have to documentation and publication of these works, is hidden by the shadows of erosion and erasure. This remains an area of urgent redress. The preservation of this archive and support of intergenerational cultural heritage transfer, arts education and mentorship between generations are vital.

The post-2010 Black independent publishers, spoken-word poetry event curators and breadth of festivals over the past decade are driven by a confident, educated, social justice-oriented and/or feminist generation. They are comfortable and skilled in social media, marketing and technology, exemplifying this leap from the past towards a new future; they operate with freedom to write and say what they need to, in the ways they want to use. They occupy a multitude of platforms and print media is sometimes at risk of being the proverbial "baby that is being thrown out with the water". There are

¹⁰ Edited by three of WEAVE's founder members, Shelley Barry, Malika Ndlovu and Deela Khan (WEAVE 2000).

significant poetry education initiatives such as ZAPP (the South African Poetry Project), the youth-focused school poetry recitation competition Poetry for Life, numerous workshops and events attached to all the major literary festivals. Poetry Africa, the Open Book Festival's Poetica, the Abantu Book Festival, the South African Book Festival, Word n Sound, Hear My Voice, the Lingua Franca Spoken Word Poetry Movement, the Naked Word Poetry Festival and many campus-based poetry collectives and events across the country own their literary turf while enriching this soil for everyone, with an unprecedented diversity of poets and poetic forms. They continue exposing new tides of South African publications, voices and hosting courageous, interrogative decolonial conversations. They are doing rigorous decolonial work in the domains of literature education and publishing via the literature, with poetry holding a central space. Multilingualism in these spaces is more the norm than exception and age-old *izimbongi*¹¹ traditions are being kept alive by young bloods, slotting in comfortably on event line-ups of spoken-word events, either those with an American flavour or locally curated. This is decolonial expression embodied; it enacts what the Basotho phrase *thupelo* implies ("teaching by example"). They own their voices, choice of language and mediums of expression with pride and purpose. D'Abdon observes that

[t]he number of academics who are taking South African spoken word poetry seriously is growing by the day (Baderoon, Boswell, Byrne, Newfield, Gqola, Bashonga, Kaschula), and South African urban centres offer several poetry communities where writers, and attentive, passionate audiences have the opportunity to share words and experiences in an atmosphere of mutual respect, support and acknowledgment. (2016, 53)

There is a rapid, unstoppable flow of poetry around the globe via the internet and social media platforms. Since the establishment of the Africa Centre's Badilisha Poetry X-Change in 2011, anyone who is interested in poetry from Africa can savour a decolonial feast of over 550 pan-African poets from 32 different countries. From emerging to established poets, all are reviewed and showcased on the same cyber-stage in their chosen language, with text and/or translation alongside the audio format. This first Africa-focused poetry podcasting platform offers a major educational resource for South African poets across generations, for researchers and for educators wanting to enrich their curricula. These kinds of free digital archives and media platforms are collapsing the historical hierarchies of access to literary resources.

¹¹ In traditional African society, a composer and orator of poems praising a chief or other figurehead and "introducing act" at public or communal gatherings.

Poetry as Healing and Homecoming

This is the resonance
Of our homecoming
We the offspring
Navigating decades of drought
Endless seasons of silencing
Inheritance line rupturing
The string may have been broken
But this chord can never be cut
(Ndlovu 2019)

I use this extract from a poem as a metaphorical and creative point of departure for the core ideas in this section. It also serves to contextualise how, regardless of colonisation's violent mission to destroy and erase evidence of our interconnectedness and our cultural heritages, there are ways in which this suffering has only fed our collective resilience. It speaks of resonance and remembering, the potent yet less visible ways in which we have survived. As an extract from a tribute to an indigenous musician playing the *uhadi*, a single-stringed, distinctly Khoi-San instrument, yet echoing other instruments such as the *berimbau* of Brazil, this resonance expands to encompass interconnected slave histories and cultures echoing through the artistic expressions of the global South.

South Africa is a nation bearing trans-generational trauma, widespread mental illness and extreme levels of violence, all exacerbated by prevailing economic injustice that continues to affect our present and all of our futures. There is no miracle cure and poetry alone certainly cannot remedy all the problems: yet I ask, "What might an inward-turning and integrative approach to decolonial activism look like and how can poetry assist or facilitate this process? Where and how does poetry play a healing role?" We may need "soft power" as a radical practice of response and resilience at this time. Art, and specifically poetry, is the "soft power" I am speaking of, a response-able rather than reactionary way. Mass action engaging people one by one, in small, then widening circles, can effect authentic transformation. We have no shortage of experienced arts activists, poets in particular, who already have the building blocks for a workable national strategy, utilising these applied-arts practices. They have years of experience in working with individuals and communities through their own or government and NGO-driven initiatives already dedicated to health, education and social welfare. We need visionary, trans-generational collaboration and innovation, not the reinvention of the wheel.

The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering. (Okri 2012)¹²

Struggle poetry (as it is called) was simultaneously a weapon, an activist tool, a balm and a form of documentation for honouring individual and collective experiences of injustice, loss and learning. Publications and poetry gatherings were places of expression and release, for affirmation of the wholeness to our beings beyond the assault on our bodies. I wonder how many recognise that, regardless of the two-decade stretch into democracy, many South African poets using a variety of media, modalities and various forms of social justice activism are serving exactly the same cause in the twenty-first century. The struggle, the work on inner and outer wellness, is evidently far from over and may never be complete. The social justice movements and vast non-governmental organisation sector South African arts activists have found ourselves in rarely acknowledge the prevalence of mental health issues, compassion fatigue, desensitisation and burnout that are found among the members and leaders of such groups. Yet the quality of our activism is strengthened or compromised by the quality of our own health and wellness. The nature of all kinds of caregiving depends on critical balance between care for the collective and care for the self.

Re-turning towards Ourselves

Understanding decolonisation as a complex, multidimensional and ongoing journey, it would be fair to say that, where colonial forces have shattered and displaced, this is the work of re-turning. This is a homecoming to the places of belonging, not only to significant physical (trauma) sites or families and communities, but also to our right to wellness and to joy. It is the reclamation and wider reintegration of indigenous knowledge systems, as a grounding influence in South African education, socialisation and to honour our heritages. As an applied artist advocating for decolonial poetry practices and curricula, there is no question as to whether poetry itself is a healing or therapeutic modality. The telling phrase, “poetry saved my life”, or the necessity of poets issuing trigger warnings before speaking or posting a poem online, has become commonplace in our times.

Everything given time and nurturing, is moving toward balance and healing. Healing is organic, healing is our birthright. (Lisa Thomas-Adeyemo, in Brown 2017, 123)¹³

Within indigenous knowledge systems, belief in the therapeutic effects of art forms, each in their own way, is an integrated natural understanding. There are numerous

¹² From Ben Okri’s epic poem, *Mental Flight: An Anti-spell for the 21st Century* (2012). Ben Okri is a Nigerian poet and novelist born in 1959 in Minna, Northern Nigeria, and he is considered one of the foremost African authors in the post-modern and post-colonial traditions.

¹³ Lisa Thomas-Adeyemo is a senior teacher for generative somatics, a training assistant for Strozzi Institute, and a community-based healer, somatic body-worker and dedicated to transformation and healing within oppressed communities (see <https://strozziinstitute.com/staff/lisa-thomas-adeyemo/>).

examples of how indigenous music, song, dance and storytelling serve as medicine, reinforcing people's direct connection to the Earth along with its variety of natural medicines and the therapeutic, sacred or ritual spaces the land provides. Notions of spiritual connection and energy balance versus imbalance or blockage have been long-held, commonly understood frameworks across traditions all over the world, informing how we relate to human health or un-wellness and dis-ease. Colonial-informed healing practices and health sciences are generally dismissive of mind-body-spirit connections. The arts were historically seen as almost entirely unrelated to medicine or psychology. Interdisciplinary practices such as the art therapies¹⁴ and arts-in-medicine initiatives are relatively recent integrations. They are an overdue yet welcomed affirmation of the invaluable contribution creative expression has on the health of patients, clients and care providers alike.

While music, dance, drama and visual art therapies are widely known, poetry therapy is a unique form of psychotherapy that falls under the broader category of expressive therapy (cf. Mothibe and Sibanda 2019). Christopher Behan writes:

The poems allow linguistic space and metaphorical distance for clients to explore connections with others, engagement in the world or an alternate view of self. Poetic practices are being explored simultaneously in all sorts of therapy and community organization settings these days and present many possibilities. (2013)

The Life Righting Collective, founded by Dawn Garisch, a medical doctor and award-winning author and poet, is one South African non-profit organisation (NPO) dedicated to the healing power of writing.

Seni Seneviratne¹⁵ in her paper, "Speaking the Unspeakable: The Poetry of Witness", presented at the Beyond Reconciliation Conference in Cape Town in December 2009 aptly states:

In some way poetry engages with emotions, the felt sense of the body, images, metaphors and searches for a language, thereby making a connection to the meaning-making centers of the brain. It acts as a channel or a bridge between them. Those immediately affected by a trauma are silenced, frozen by the horror of what they have witnessed and in many instances it falls to following generations to break the silence, bring the details to light. Poets act as mediums to channel the voices of silent and silenced ancestors. (2009)

¹⁴ The South African National Arts Therapies Organisation represents the interests of arts therapists and the four arts therapy professions: art, music, drama and dance movement therapy across South Africa (<http://sanato.co.za/>).

¹⁵ Seni Seneviratne is a poet, freelance writer, mentor, trainer and creative consultant born and raised in Leeds, Yorkshire and is of English and Sri Lankan heritage (see www.seniseneviratne.com).

The indigenous poetry tradition of *izimbongi*, connected to ancestral channeling as much as they craft oral history and praise, are very much alive in South Africa. But there is also a surge of ancestral and healing work by young cultural activists from diverse backgrounds and what some refer to as healer-poets of this era. Influenced by the work of poets before them, who prioritised the sacred, ancestral and healing aspects of poetry, they are leading creators of transdisciplinary work and platforms, poetry collectives and events. They include Vangile Gantsho, Toni Stuart, Vuyokazi Ngenmtu, Lwanda Sindaphi, Ronelda Kamfer, Katleho Kano Shoro, Busisiwe Mahlangu, Joyln Phillips, Koleka Putuma, Sarah Godsell, Ashley Makue, Koleka Putuma, Khanyisile Mbongwa, Allison Claire Hoskins and Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese, to name only a few. This intergenerational poetry torch is being carried predominantly by Black women and by BIPOC.¹⁶

Listening through Poetry

Listening is a foundational aspect of all healing practices, whether listening to narratives by patients/clients narratives, to the body's messaging through symptoms or physiological crises. It can also be "tuning in" to other sources of energy and guidance to activate or support the return to wellness. For poets applying their art for healing, this may also encompass intuition, inspiration and imagination. Cape Town-based South African poet, performer and spoken-word educator Toni Stuart actively promotes poetry as the art of listening in public initiatives such as her "Here to Listen" live and online installation and her writing workshops titled "The Silence That Words Come from". She describes her work as "listening for the stories that will help us heal. Poetry is how I listen" (Stuart 2020).

Listening is a way of presencing (sitting with or with-nessing): it is essential for a range of decolonial (poetry) methodologies, such as uncensored naming and re-membering processes, revisiting of literal and figurative sites of wounding and injustice, and non-confrontational yet direct dialogue. It is also a way to call in imagination, the unknown; it invites conscious play. It sparks creative collaboration and it can be used to welcome ancestral guidance and blessing of the work. This is the recognition of multiple sources and forms of truth, learning, intelligence and knowledge. It humbles us to acknowledge that what is coming through us as artists, as applied-arts practitioners or engaged in healing work of any kind, is not entirely ours. Rather, it is an interconnected web of collaborative work with spirit, ancestry, nature and with our poetry lineage. This refers to the legacies of poets who have passed on, but also to those who are currently marginalised, yet still here, who can teach us through listening. Listening can be a conscious meditative practice, the emptying of oneself, the detachment or release of fixed and weathered frameworks of thought for a while, to loosen the soil of being. Such an approach is in direct opposition to most people's idea of activism, but it wrongly

¹⁶ Black, Indigenous, People of Color (Garcia 2020).

assumes that listening is not an act or an activist strategy. Indeed, listening has guided my work as a poet and applied artist, shaping my language, guiding my often-improvised vocal refrains and the conscious ritual elements of my performances.

While the word and sound (music, vocal interplay and song) relationship in indigenous poetry's spectrum of multimodality is more readily understood, to conclude this section I want to point to another less obvious aspect of this dynamic. The use of vocals, live and recorded music is a common backdrop for poems presented on stage or in digital format. But this word-sound element of indigenous expression can also be understood as channeling emotion and energy within the space. Since music is the universal language, it is a way of achieving inclusivity when connecting with audiences across language and cultural difference. Sound is a common human vibrational capacity. Much more can be investigated to reveal why and how applied poetry and indigenous poetry performance affects its practitioners and audiences or receivers in the ways it does. Here I simply want to instigate curiosity and encouragement for the further exploration and research of these aspects. This expansive, transdisciplinary thinking, I believe, would enrich any form of engagement with decoloniality in/and poetry.

Conclusion: The Dance Continues

One cannot know the gravity of this work without tasting its light/ness. Our mutual learning or "enlightenment" deepens and expands the more we commit to "the dance". In South Africa we have already been dancing with mountains for a long time. We are also changed by the shifts in our movement. Our poets, thinkers, dreamers and imagineers know that mountains actually do move. In many ways they move us to shift perspective, to climb even higher, brave the shadows and the cold, to earn the eagle eye view from the top, to receive the gifts of the visions we are working to manifest.

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