

# *GAU-Trained: Poems and Stories*, by Flow Wellington

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Johannesburg has been written about extensively, offering either a bird's eye view, a street-level view or a combination of both (Samin 2009, para 1). The city has been described as expansive, daunting, overwhelming, complex, illusive, vibrant and by the author as holding “so much of everything for everyone” (Wellington 2018, xii). Known as the City of Gold after the gold rush of 1886, and the subsequent forced migration to the city, Johannesburg is viewed as a place of opportunity and success. It is home to the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and is the financial capital of South Africa. This colonial narrative is not new. It has been portrayed in books such as *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985) by Beverly Naidoo and films such as *Jim Comes to Joburg* (1949) in which a naïve person from the countryside/rural area moves to the city to earn a living, learns about it the hard way and eventually understands its ways. It is also still present in contemporary writing, as is seen in *GAU-Trained: Poems and Stories*.

Is it possible then to change this long-held narrative and perception of the city? Can one decolonise and reshape this narrative? Hungwe and Divala (2019, 225) define decolonisation as a process where one must “learn, unlearn, deconstruct and reconstruct values, norms, beliefs and thought systems that were disseminated during colonialism”. Decolonisation includes becoming conscious of these values, norms, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions in order to unlearn and deconstruct them. How does one deconstruct and unlearn the perceptions of a city? *GAU-Trained* attempts this by deconstructing its iconic city skyline (and the external shiny perceptions that come with it) to show us the “cracks in the concrete reality of Egoli” (Kruger 2001, 232). The author uses a participant observation lens to educate and shed light on life in Johannesburg. Wellington takes the reader through the maze that is the Johannesburg city centre.



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The title of the book, *GAU-Trained*, alludes to the public transport service, as seen on the cover. However, the title can also be interpreted as “trained by the Gau”—being trained by Gauteng, specifically Johannesburg, or as “I took the Gautrain to get a bearing of the city”. The book uses the metaphor of a train ride to guide the reader. It traces the journey from arriving in Johannesburg, experiencing what the city is really like, to finally being settled. Wellington (2018, xii) explains this as follows:

As much as this book is a retrospective journey of my own life ... it is also anyone’s journey: from arriving in Johannesburg (The Platform), to the pushing and pulling that the city inadvertently does on you (Derailed and Crossroads), to the realisation that there is always hope and light when you reach out and push beyond your limits (Full Steam Ahead).

The book is a self-published, mostly autobiographical collection about life in Johannesburg over a six-year period from 2011, as observed, experienced and learned by author Flow Wellington. The author shares stories about the everyday grit of Johannesburg’s Central Business District (CBD) and the lives not shown on tourist brochures. She reflects: “Living in the heart of the Jozi CBD showed me how sugar-coated our tourism campaigns are” (Wellington 2018, xi). While her book continues the “Journey to Joburg” narrative to a degree, it also removes the rose-tinted glasses created by tourism, marketing and advertising to let the reader see the city in its entirety. Johannesburg can be where dreams come true or where they come to die. As Wellington (2018, xii) states: “There was going to be no romanticising of anything in these pages”.

Poetry in South Africa has long been used as a revolutionary tool and has played a significant role in documenting our history. Godsell (2019, 3) uses poetry as a way to decolonise the teaching of history. This is done by recentring history in learning spaces to include the less dominant or lesser known perspectives and voices. Wellington also does this with her poetry. In her words:

I highlight what some would call the filth of Joburg. I felt more than anything ... to give ... people who battle through the worst living conditions in the CBD a voice, in some way. (Wellington 2018, xi)

Stories such as “Escape” (16) and “Jeppe” (37) and poems such as “Vimba!” (28) and “Last Straw” (40) make these voices visible. “Last Straw” describes what can be assumed to be recurring domestic violence that ends with the arrival of the police, while “Escape” is about a woman’s attempt to leave her husband and “Jeppe” narrates Onah’s, the protagonist’s, day at a clinic.

As already stated, the book is divided into sections: “The Platform”, “Derailed”, “Crossroads” and “Full Steam Ahead”. Wellington is deliberate in organising her poems and section titles, ensuring that they keep in line with the train ride metaphor. “The Platform” is about arriving in Johannesburg as a foreigner. The first poem, “The City”, is a befitting introduction. Describing the hustle and bustle of Johannesburg CBD, it

feels as if you are walking through the city, observing and taking it in, realising that Johannesburg is dangerous and alluring at the same time. The city “sleeps with one eye open; spying blatantly on night crawlers”; here, “nothing is free, not even your will”. It “holds no sentiments”, it “leaves you clinging to memories: the beauty and the malice” (Wellington 2018, 2).

“Derailed” deals with the reality of the city—a far cry from the dreams that it sells. While poems such as “Driving Miss Crazy” and “Sex and the City Pt 1 and 2” make reference to movies, they also describe some harsh truths. “Driving Miss Crazy”, a play on the film title *Driving Miss Daisy*, is about someone attempting to overcome sadness and maintain sanity, while having faith that circumstances will get better. Another indirect reference to the film is the plot, where Daisy, the main protagonist, crashes her car, and ends up with a chauffeur. Thus, the poem, like the film, deals with how to rebuild one’s life after it “goes off the rails”.

The “Sex and the City” poems, which can be interpreted as dramatic monologues, illustrate the intergenerational cycle of sex work. In Part 1, the narrator grows up looking forward to being like her mother, wearing new clothes, smelling nice and counting money into piles (Wellington 2018, 27). In Part 2, the narrator from Part 1 has assumed the role of her mother, and her younger sister is the narrator in this poem. Moreover, the younger sister is being groomed to be a sex worker when she is older (Wellington 2018, 32). This is in stark contrast to the “Sex and the City” romantic comedy films and series franchise.<sup>1</sup> These two poems are connected not only in title, but in form as well. Part 2 builds on lines from Part 1. This technique connects the poems and continues the narrative.

The “Derailed” section opens with “Where I’m from”, a nostalgic poem about growing up in Port Elizabeth. It is about dealing with life’s left turns, being stuck between dreams and present circumstances. “Crossroads” is a more personal section of the book. “Terugkeering” (“Returning Home”), “Mixed Enough” and “Afrika Kind” (“African Child”) are autobiographical and about the author’s identity, specifically about returning home and feeling like a stranger, embracing one’s eclectic identity and a call to stop hiding from oneself. “Terugkeering” describes the return home, finding everything the same, but feeling different. Upon arrival,

Die branders klap nog ewe hard teen die rotse.  
 Die taxi bestuurders staan die ewe trots  
 En die strate lyk nog dieselfde:  
 Ou bure skinder nog lekker

(The waves still crash as hard against the rocks

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<sup>1</sup> *Sex and the City* is an American series that centres on the lives of four women living in New York. The series premiered in 1998 and ran for six seasons. Two movies were created based on the series.

The taxi drivers stand as proud  
And the streets still look the same  
Old neighbours still gossip)  
(Wellington 2018, 30)

Although familiar, being home reminds the author that she has become more of a stranger. The poem ends as follows:

Ek's nou meer vreemdeling  
As huiskind, en dis hoe mens terugkeer

(I am now more of a stranger  
Than a child of the house, and this is how people return)  
(Wellington 2018, 30)

In “Afrika Kind”, the author asks:

Afrika-kind, hoekom steek jy so weg  
Agter die wêreld se make-up en relaxers,  
Elke seisoen se next-best-trend  
Waarom vlug jy van jou geboorte reg;  
Hoekom is jou erfenis so sondelik,  
So bitter op jou tong?

(African child, why do you hide  
Behind the world's make-up and relaxers  
Every season's next best trend  
Why do you flee from your birthright;  
Why is your heritage so sinful,  
So bitter on your tongue?)  
(Wellington 2018, 34)

The poem continues to urge Africans to embrace their heritage, their bushy hair, dark eyes, sun-kissed skin and to stop hiding from themselves. “Terugkeering” and “Afrika Kind” are written in Afrikaans, presumably the author’s home language, reflecting her identity and serving as a reminder that Afrikaans is not spoken only by white people. McKaiser (2016) touches on this in his article titled “It’s Time to Decolonise Afrikaans”. In his view, the “white Afrikaans hegemony” needs to be dismantled and reconstructed to include the diversity of Coloured communities.

The book ends with “Full Steam Ahead”, alluding to moving forward with positivity, speed, energy and determination. The last poem, “Lesedi”, is a short poem about a shooting star, symbolic of a light at the end of the tunnel, an end to hard times.

Wellington’s writing style is straightforward, making the book easy to read and understand. Although emphasis is mainly placed on content and meaning, the author

makes use of a variety of literary techniques. Poems such as “Master Chef” and “Journey” experiment with form. “West Rand” is a four-stanza poem, each stanza containing four lines of two or three words each.

Red sand  
Quiet streets  
Midnight walk  
Hip hop beats

High walls  
Racist fears  
Student lives  
Drugs and beers ...  
(Wellington 2018, 19)

The abcb rhyme scheme appears only in the first two stanzas.

Alliteration can be seen in “The City”, the opening poem of the book, as well as in “Knowing”. In “The City”, the effect of alliteration is to draw the reader to the words used to describe the Johannesburg CBD, namely “rowdy roads”, “fabricated fulfillment” and “majestic madness” (Wellington 2018, 2). “Borders”, “Instructions For Chaos” and “Impepho” make use of parallelism. On occasion, the reader is addressed through “Ignorance Is Bliss” and “Derailed”. It would be interesting to see more writing from Wellington in Afrikaans. Her Afrikaans poems are just as easy to understand as her English ones.

There are a few visuals included, which the book is better without. They are of low resolution and although they are meant to complement the text, they are not needed as the text adequately conveys the content.

As a new resident to Johannesburg myself, and living in the CBD, I was hoping to be able to see my own experiences reflected. I was not disappointed. The book reaffirmed my experiences. Overall, we learn that things are never as they seem, that life has many lessons to teach us and education is most certainly not limited to the classroom.

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