

“You Remember to Excavate; You Excavate to Remember:”¹ Women Poets Exposing the Shortcomings of the South African Archive²

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intersections of race, class, and gender in women’s voices and/or in historical characters from a selected corpus of English and Afrikaans poems from South Africa. The discussed authors include Makhosazana Xaba, Koleka Putuma, Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, Malika Ndlovu, Yvette Christiansë, Ronelda Kamfer, Jolyn Phillips, and Lynthia Julius. The article will specifically examine how black and coloured women’s poetry often focuses on historical female figures, either ignored or marginalised in the official records. By unearthing forgotten women and their life stories, the poets we examine contribute to illuminating the complex experiences of South African black and coloured women from different periods. The theoretical approaches that have supported us in this journey include recent views on the concept of intersectionality, such as the current reflections on the dynamics of assemblage (Bogic 2017), critical approaches to South African feminism and literature, like Barbara Boswell’s *And Wrote My Story Anyway* (2020), and insights on the controversial political and cultural archives of South Africa, as put forward by Verne Harris (2021). This analysis will focus on how the selected poems contest the dominant versions of history and the official archive’s lack of inclusiveness.

Keywords: intersectionality; South African women’s poetry in English and Afrikaans;

1 These lines come from Putuma 2021, 46.

2 This article is the result of a collaborative project by the two authors. Paragraphs one and three are authored by Francesca Terrenato. Paragraphs two and four are by Maria Paola Guarducci. While we were completing this article, Zoë Wicomb, whose works have guided readers and scholars through the complexities of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, suddenly passed away. We would like to pay homage to her memory.

Koleka Putuma; Ronelda Kamfer; apartheid and post-apartheid

Introduction

When dealing with the complexity of South African cultural expressions, it is advisable to acknowledge from the outset the boundaries within which we, as individual scholars, as well as our research paths, operate. The limitations we face in dealing with South African women's poetry are due firstly to language barriers, as we cannot comprehend most South African languages, and secondly to the colonial past and present of the two languages, English and Afrikaans, in which we are proficient. Furthermore, our education in English and Dutch literatures, positioning European countries at the centre of literary tradition and expression, must be mentioned as a potentially distortive factor in our reading, however well-intended. Finally, readers should consider the difficulty we had in working from the margins (as Italy is in this case) and dealing with texts, which are sometimes hard to retrieve. The landscape of contemporary South African black women's poetry, being rich and heterogeneous as it is,³ cannot be exhaustively represented in this article, which will only refer to examples from our recent investigations.

After the publication of our book on South African women's poetry in English and Afrikaans,⁴ in which we tried to trace converging and diverging aspects across languages, generations and ethnic affiliations, we have acquired a better insight into recent poetry by black⁵ women writers and performers. What also played an important role in this process was meeting in person, and/or hosting in our homes and home institutions, authors such as Koleka Putuma, Ronelda Kamfer, Toni Stuart, and Veronique Jephtha. These poets are part of a new wave that follows the footsteps of a previous generation of engaged women poets and performers (among them Makhosazana Xaba, Gcina Mhlophe, Diana Ferrus, and Khadija Heeger).

Some valuable insights Barbara Boswell offers might be applied to our current research. Boswell believes in "the fundamental power of stories to shape and transform lives" and pleads to consider literary works by black women "as a set of theories that produce a praxis towards a more just social order" (Boswell 2020, 1). She states that black South African women writers created through the apartheid years a canon that "interrogated power in its most brute forms. It is within this tradition that post-apartheid black women's writing situates itself" (Boswell 2020, 2). Even in post-apartheid South Africa, she points out, women writers "are engaged in a series of boundary-crossings, surpassing the thresholds of expectation that view them as non-suitable producers of art, given their collective historical relegation to the realm of physical labor and non-intellectual work" (Boswell 2020, 17). Poetry, just as fiction, can indeed become the

3 See Xaba 2019, 15–61.

4 Guarducci and Terrenato 2022.

5 We stick to the inclusive use of the term "black" as in Lewis and Baderoon 2019, 3–4.

site of a theoretical production oriented towards rememory⁶ and healing in a feminist intersectional frame, as the work of Koleka Putuma, Phillipa Yaa de Villiers, Malika Ndlovu, Yvette Christiansë, Ronelda Kamfer, Jolyn Phillips, and Lynthia Julius, to mention but a few, demonstrates.

Verne Harris recalls the removal, under apartheid, of dissident and/or marginal voices and experiences, and underlines the need to widen the archive by including oral culture, as practised by black women (Harris 2002, 80). As we still face unfilled gaps in archived history, the search for unrecorded tales can cross the boundaries of factuality and enter the sphere of imagination:

For over a decade now, in the academy, in memory institutions, school classrooms, courtrooms, the media, people's living rooms, and, crucially, the TRC, South Africans have been searching for meanings in a myriad narratives of the past. For some, the meanings are borne by 'facts;' the 'truth' of what happened. For others 'fact' and 'fiction,' 'history' and 'story,' coalesce in imaginative space. (Harris 2002, 82)

Borrowing a concept from the scholarship on the fictional autobiographies of J. M. Coetzee, a peculiar form of *autrebiography* (Coetzee 1992, 394) is at play, as we will see, in some of these poems. By evoking a woman from the past, these texts provide rooting for the writing self in a net of relations that knows no boundary between (auto)biographical document and literary creation. Seyla Benhabib proposes that gender-based subjectivity, for women, can be problematically yet effectively reformulated within a network. She underlines how female agency consists of re-elaborating fragments of narratives, activating a dialogue in which others "are not only subjects of my story but also tell their stories in competition with mine" (Benhabib 1999, 348).

Several recent poems overturn dominant perspectives and actively propose different ways of engaging with the past. Among these, we may point to an ongoing rewriting of and around overexploited historical figures in the archive, such as Krotoa and Sarah Baartman, to liberate their heritage from manipulations.⁷ Another interesting trend sees the surfacing of women who have never been part of the archive, or who, even when recorded, have been ghosted, hushed, and filtered in the process. In the case of Afrikaans women poets, who relate to the coloured community, the surfacing of coloured female subjects in poems interacts with the reflections on coloured identity and culture that started in the post-apartheid era. For instance, studies by Zimitri Erasmus (2001) and Mohammed Adhikari (2009) provide a fitting frame for the work of poets such as Kamfer, Phillips, and Julius.

6 This term was introduced by Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (1987) to indicate a memory that opposes silence and amnesia.

7 The presence of these two figures in selected poetic, performative, and visual texts is explored in Guarducci and Terrenato 2024.

Among those who are absent in conventional records, and who are revived in poetry, we may count the numberless enslaved and native women whose names only scantily resurface, if they do at all, in historical sources; the women activists and activists of a less distant past who are ignored or marginalised in the official discourse on the struggle, and, notably, women who stood firm in the families and communities in a day-to-day fight for survival and dignity.⁸

In the ongoing construction of an intersectional toolset for literary texts, when investigating black South African women's cultural production, we must be cautious in adopting theoretical tools that might be oversimplifying, biased, or ungrounded. The concept of assemblage, as presented by Jasbir Puar and later problematised by Anna Bogic, foregrounds the centrifugal and fluid aspects of identity-shaping and the possibility of restoring erased complexities. Hence, it seems to be a fitting lens to read our poetic texts: "intersectionality should be re-read as assemblage in order to highlight movement and mobility: the subject should be viewed as composed of dissipating, indiscreet elements always in the process of becoming" (Bogic 2017, 138). Desirée Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon also underline how "[a]ssemblage provides a valuable strategy for understanding intersecting power relations and systems that constantly shift, proliferate and cohere, either to recuperate or contest varying forms of injustice and oppression" (Lewis and Baderoon 2021, 7). The same stance is put forward by Boswell, when she states:

Deconstructing and unravelling the various rudiments of identity, especially in a country burdened by centuries of institutionalised racism, is a project fraught with complexity. Identity, always fluid and dynamic, 'measured' or defined, represents, at best, a momentary freeze-frame, a composite of experience and subjectivity as temporal as the moment in which it is defined. (Boswell 2020, 29)

Black Women's Stories, Black Women's Bodies

I write so that the tale of the hunt
 May be heard also, from the mouth of
 The hunted; the hated of this world
 For only then, will that story
 Be anywhere near complete...
 (Magona 2009, 59)

8 Among the most effective examples of the creation of a micro-historical archive of women from the family of the poet, we may refer to Ronelda Kamfer's *Hammie* (2016) and Khadija Heeger's *Thicker Than Sorrow* (2022). Personal memory as a key to read the past and a pronounced presence of first-person pronouns are hallmarks of Gabeba Baderoon's poetry, whose strong connection to history emerges particularly in *The History of Intimacy* (2018).

In her poem, “Statement,” which rephrases Chinua Achebe’s famous dictum of the lion and the hunter, Sindiwe Magona stresses the need for South African history to change its point of view, as “[f]or centuries,/Others have written about us” (Magona 2009, 59). In more recent women’s poetry, although the postcolonial input is still at work, the gender perspective has gained more ground, informing the scrutiny of what is written/told/omitted and how collective narratives are addressed and conveyed.

Naming Women, Unveiling Herstories

The long poem, *Tongues of Their Mothers* (2008) by Makhosazana Xaba, manifests the urgency of filling the many holes in history and correcting its selective manipulations. It is black women, in fact, who are the great absentees in the South African narrative(s) and who are often erased in the memory of their own community, too. The point here is not just *writing back* but proposing lateral perspectives that can highlight inconsistencies that linger on in the present. Recovering women’s stories is therefore vital; even if/when they do not necessarily fit, even if/when they clash or contradict one another. Poetry constitutes a privileged space for rectifying and rewriting South African history from a female perspective, because it is the ideal site where *silence* can speak, and *silencing* women does not occur. The overexposed figure of Sarah Baartman (1789–1815), a long-standing object of ideological fabrications, opens Xaba’s ground-breaking poem. Baartman’s tale settled alongside that of her European “patrons,” even scientists, who first enslaved her and then made her a (sexual) object to be exhibited, alive as well as dead.⁹ While suggesting the erasure of the most abused features of this woman’s story, Xaba brings to light what has never emerged about her, that is, an intimate, psychological, private tale:

I wish to write an epic poem about Sarah Baartman,
 one that will be silent on her capturers, torturers and demolishers.
 It will say nothing of the experiments, the laboratories and the displays
 or even the diplomatic dabbles that brought her remains home,
 eventually.
 The poem will sing of the Gamtoos Valley holding imprints of her
 baby steps.
 It will contain rhymes about the games she played as a child,
 stanzas will have names of her friends, her family, her community.
 It will borrow from every single poem ever written about her,
 conjuring up her wholeness: her voice, dreams, emotions and thoughts.
 (Xaba 2008, 25)

These lines speak about a “wholeness” against the dissections and fragmentation to which Sarah was subjected when alive, when dead, in the ways she was forgotten,

9 Baartman’s remains only returned to South Africa (from France) in 2002 after a long negotiation led by Nelson Mandela (for a detailed reconstruction, based on historical sources and plausible interpretations about Baartman’s life and legacy, see Holmes 2007).

remembered, and even celebrated. The following stanzas announce more “epic” poems to come on Mnkabayi Jama Zulu (1750–1843),¹⁰ Daisy Makiwane (1878–195?),¹¹ Magogo Constance Zulu (1900–1984),¹² Victoria Mxenge (1942–1985),¹³ and Nomvula Glenrose Mbatha.¹⁴ Xaba insists on what her poems will *not* tell and which (male) characters they will *not* mention: the men who, within the frame of an inherent misogyny, often usurped their fame—even when close relatives—exploiting their bodies and voices, stealing their advice, work, ideas, passions, and charisma. Obscured in official history, these female figures deserve centrality in the form that most traditionally celebrates male heroes: the epic. The poem, though, closes by suggesting that the time is not yet ripe:

These are just some of the epic poems I wish to write
 about women of the world, in the tongues of their mothers.
 I will present the women in forms that match their foundations
 using metaphors of moments that defined their beings
 and similes that flow through our seasons of eternity.
 But I am not yet ready to write these poems.
 (Xaba 2008, 27)

In advocating a different historical framework, based on sisterhood and free from chronology — “similes that flow through our seasons of eternity” — these lines also suggest a recodification of language. “*The tongues of their mothers*” will answer back the silence of the past through a strong sonority indicated by the alliteration of fricatives and dental occlusives.

Koleka Putuma travels the track opened by *Tongues of Their Mothers* in different forms. The poem “Lifeline,” from *Collective Amnesia* (2017), consists of a list of 68 names of black women (one being Xaba herself), ranging from fellow artists to politicians, scholars, businesswomen, lawyers, activists, and activists of different ages, times,

10 A Zulu princess who worked to ensure political stability for the Qulusi tribe by arranging strategic marriages for her father, King Jama, and holding the regency in the name of her young brother Senzangakhona, later becoming his councillor at his coronation. She was also advisor to King Shaka, her nephew (see Weir 2008).

11 Journalist, feminist activist, teacher, and nurse originally from Transkei, we find her in London in the 1950s, together with her brother Tennyson, engaged in the anti-apartheid campaign. She is also Noni Jabavu’s aunt (see Victor 2018).

12 From a noble Zulu family, Magogo Constance was the mother of the Inkatha Freedom Party’s leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, as well as the sister of a Zulu king. Magogo is best known for her role as *imbongi*, traditionally held by men, for which she has received major awards that attest to her fundamental contribution in the transmission of Zulu music and poetry (see Rycroft 1985).

13 A nurse, then a lawyer, she was an anti-apartheid activist. After the murder of her husband by Vlakplaas agents, she successfully ran their law firm until government-hired killers shot her in the street. Her funeral gathered over 10 000 people and was the cause of a small riot that was violently quelled by the state police (for a brief reconstruction of Mxenge’s biography, see South African History Online 2011).

14 Xaba’s mother, a former teacher.

nationality, class, sexual orientation, prominence, etc. Each name, Putuma writes, “is a gospel shut up in my bones,” thus treating individual identities as sacred and her (woman’s) body as a safe, preserving, and passing on a memory which composes an interrelated, fluid, and female canon. *Lifeline*’s heterogeneous universe needs to be treasured to make empowerment possible for black girls—the addressees of this poem—in an environment still hostile to female subjects. In the list, one can also find Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, who, in her composition *What the Dead Say* (2009), laments the absence of a shared narrative in which to recognise herself as a woman. In this poem, she portrays a young guide accompanying tourists in South African historical sites haunted by ghosts. The (black) woman’s sense of not belonging to the formulaic tale offered to tourists is stark and gives way to the urgent need—“please, please”—to visualise a plausible picture of herself and hear her story instead:

We have no place in this history that they say
is ours. Who are these heroes?
Strangers stare out of books
like products in foreign shop windows. Please,
please, show me a picture of me.
Tell my story
(de Villiers 2009, 20)

Similarly, there is a telling composition devoted to the memory of Lydia Williams, aka “Ou Tamelytjie” (1820?–1910), by Malika Ndlovu, a fellow poet also listed in Putuma’s “Lifeline.” Lydia Williams was an enslaved woman who gained emancipation with the abolition of slavery in 1838; since then, she acted as a griot/living saint in District Six (Cape Town), commemorating Emancipation Day every year by sharing stories from her past with her local community.¹⁵ Ndlovu wonders about “this hole in our history:” a void the historical Lydia tried to fill by “singing the truth and the tragedy/of our buried heritage/our slavery” (Ndlovu 2008, 153). The woman is portrayed as a repressed ghost who needs a second emancipation:

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 honor
recorded in our history
embedded in our memory
(Ndlovu 2008, 53)

15 A fair reconstruction of Williams’ life and role in her community can be found at <https://camissamuseum.co.za/index.php/7-tributaries/2-african-asian-enslaved-peoples/lydia-williams-masbiekers> and <https://humanities.uct.ac.za/apc/number-79377-memory-lydia-williams-ex-cape-slave-woman>.

The same need to widen the archive and make room for the invisible, the unrecorded, the forgotten (women) is at the heart of Yvette Christiansë's two collections of poetry, *Imprendehora* (2009) and *Castaway* (1999), in which the author faces the haunting presence of enslaved men and women swallowed up by the sea while crossing the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Drawing from official and unofficial archives and registers, imaginary and actual diaries, oral tales and other sources, Christiansë not only rectifies a biased history written and peopled by (mainly white) men but also recreates a decolonised map of southern lands, islands, and waters obscured by more studied routes. In this re-created world, the black female family lineage provides a very different historical and geographical framework from the one recited in colonial classrooms:

“Name the largest river in...”
 The Nile, Reverend Mother.
 The Conga, Reverend Mother.
 The... The... river
 that flows from my grandmother
 to my mother, into
 me and my sister and now
 the great-grandson where it waits.
 (Christiansë 1999, 57)

Re-membering “Multiple Women”

Putuma's second collection, *Hullo Bu-Bye Koko Come In* (2021), gets to the very heart of the matter—the invisibility of black women's stories and bodies in hetero-patriarchal history—in different ways. The poem titled “When They Say Our Work is Universal” consists of a footnote only, which reads “they also mean to say that they centre themselves in our narratives, too” (Putuma 2021, 113). This warning works as a key to read part of the collection. In fact, *Hullo Bu-Bye Koko Come In* mainly focuses on black icons who were celebrated as singers and musicians while being nullified as complex beings by the entertainment industry. Putuma strives to restore their political and human value, alongside the memory of the many women activists who fought and participated in building the country, but did not make it into history books. In *you built this country with your movements too*, she recalls the actions of 21 women whose names are given in footnotes, as if to parody the minor role history has assigned them. Finally, she remembers ordinary women, family figures such as the grandmothers, who were precious teachers in challenging times (as in the poem *Ntombi*). Isolated in their lives because of their invisibility or despite their hypervisibility, these women, with their voices and/or deeds, coexist in the space created both on the pages of the book and in its many stage adaptations: “The experience of being Black, queer and erased, from the archive, from politics, isn't a singular story. It is not just my story; it is the story of multiple women” (Putuma 2024). The concept of “multiple women” coined by Putuma advocates a kaleidoscopic archive in constant construction, made up of multiple voices, realities, times, spaces, and interpretations: all endlessly interacting with and unsettling readers and spectators alike. In some of the compositions on Brenda Fassie and Miriam Makeba,

singers, composers, but also political activists, Putuma quotes their words from interviews, mentions people's curiosities about them, and juxtaposes her own lines, activating the production of new meanings and the surfacing of different stories about these women.¹⁶ Brenda Fassie was the object of morbid curiosity because she was a victim of domestic abuse, became a queer, rebellious, and successful artist. She was also a cocaine addict and died young in 2004. In *mid belting* Vul'indlela, inspired by a popular song sung by Fassie in 2001 in the presence of Nelson Mandela, we read:

The poem wants to know:
Was Brenda seen
backspace
happy?
"I know how to sing
I know how to make people happy
And I am very much of people's property"

[20 minutes 39 seconds]

But most of all I'm grateful to the media
For making me famous
As much as I know
As much as I know
They're gonna break me

And I'd like to tell you that
I'm yours
So, do anything you want to do with me
It's ok

[29 minutes 5 seconds]

- Brenda Fassie
(Putuma 2021, 18–19)

Putuma underlines how remembering is not a linear process: it has different motivations and outcomes, as she puts it in *the weight of remembering* by writing "you remember to hold on/you remember to excavate/you excavate to remember" (Putuma 2021, 46). Restoring the memory of famous women overshadowed by their own popularity can only be achieved by digging *around* them. Miriam Makeba's civility, as it comes through from the video interviews quoted in the lines of *jukebox on demand*, prevented people from reflecting upon their own racism: a racism she perceived every time she travelled out of Africa. As a public and very popular figure, she denounced it, but also had to endure it, because she could not disappoint the audience, even if they, eager to listen to her click and ululate, could not be bothered to pronounce her name correctly:

so is it:

May-kay-ba
Mer-ker-bi

16 Among the many recent articles on Brenda Fassie, see Gervais-Lambony (2017).

Mu-ka-ba
Me-ka-bah
Mi-kay-beh
and you
polite and inoffensive
Makeba, yes.
(Putuma 2021, 29)

Being looked at with admiration and celebrated is not necessarily the same as being *seen*. Putuma herself, touring around Europe, hanging around “colonialist memorabilia,” dealing with the curiosity her hair raises, must negotiate her position and come to terms with a history that still affects present postures. In *europa asks if it can touch my hair* the poet writes:

i have mastered
how not to look angry
backspace
threatening

a visa with an expiry date
and a return ticket confirms
i will perform and leave
i will sign books
careful to be understood
careful to hear and spell each of their names correctly
while they mispronounce and mutilate mine
(Putuma 2021, 22)

A challenging experience for readers, *Hullo Bu-Bye Koko Come In* is as oppositional as it is constantly working at complicating binarism, such as us/them, by introducing intersectionality. In her seminal *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer discusses “the specific texture” of women’s existence so common among postcolonial women writers (1995, 227). She identifies a form of political commitment they achieve by “noting the validity of the buried, apparently humble lives of the women who have gone before them and who perhaps helped to make their own achievement possible. In their work, they retrieve suppressed oral traditions, half-forgotten histories, unrecorded private languages, moments of understated or unrecognized women’s resistance” (1995, 227). The prominence Putuma confers on all sorts of women and the way she retrieves aspects of their submerged and/or repressed pasts, which create alternative/parallel lives, bring to the fore the specific texture advocated by Boehmer. Putuma’s poetry is then an act of recognition as well as an expression of gratitude towards this significant female legacy.

Coloured Women, Afrikaans Poetry, and the Archive

The long trail of apartheid, still impacting individual lives, is highlighted and contested, starting from socio-cultural positionings that cannot ignore the historically assigned *race* as a contested or claimed belonging. This legacy often manifests itself in poetry as a gendered affiliation, black and/or coloured woman, with the various historical-political implications that these labels entail. The experience of the coloured people during apartheid, marked by forced removals and relocations of entire communities, and their disturbed sense of belonging in the racially based political polarisation of post-apartheid society, influences the content and form of the works by coloured women poets writing in Afrikaans.¹⁷ Ronelda Kamfer made an acclaimed debut with the collection *Noudat slapende honde* in 2008. She was the first coloured woman to publish poetry in Afrikaans with a mainstream publisher and has since become a point of reference in the South African poetry scene. Others followed in her footsteps.¹⁸ They often resort to the non-standard varieties of the “language of the devil” (Kamfer 2016, 61) to express a sense of rootedness, however problematic this may be for individuals who face the challenge of “being an exile within your own country” (Jephta 2019, 627). The creation of a coloured identity relates in ambiguous ways to its multifarious historical ancestries, in a dynamic process linked to individual and family perceptions, according to Mohamed Adhikari:

Within South Africa’s coloured community there is a tentativeness about whether members should express their identity as black, as African, as South African, as coloured, as Khoisan or as descendants of slaves, or whether they should make a stand on the principle of non-racism – or what combination of these forms of self-understanding are pertinent in what contexts. (Adhikari 2009, XVIII)

The need for a change of paradigm in recollecting and re-telling the country’s past lies at the heart of several collections by women, as we have seen. However, the act of reconstructing herstories, in the case of Afrikaans poets, embraces the complex intersections at play in the lives of coloured women. Zimitri Erasmus, in her anthropological analysis of an older woman’s life-story told in an interview, states how her narrative evokes “a sense of being coloured which is historical, cultural, racialized and gendered.” Some considerations made by Erasmus in this actual interview may offer insight into the strategies at work in the poetic corpus under examination here:

In this encounter of speaking and listening, extended into this writing, each one of us, researcher and narrator, (re-)constituted our selves through sharing moments during which we could (re-)imagine our selves in ways other than we are told – *with* culture,

17 It must be noted that the Afrikaans varieties displayed in the collections of Kamfer, Phillips and Julius - the poets selected in this article - reflect each author’s background and place of origin and attest to the diversity of Afrikaans-speaking communities. Nel (2024) discusses language peculiarities in the poetry of Phillips and Julius in the frame of the English translation of their texts.

18 For a focus on the ground-breaking debut of Kamfer and other women poets in Afrikaans, see Bonthuys 2020.

with identity, with specificity, with dignity. (Erasmus 2000, 83) [emphasis in the original]

Poets in Dialogue with Women from the Past: Kamfer and Phillips

Starting with *grond/santekraam*¹⁹ (2011), Ronelda Kamfer's second collection, a recurrent strategy is to involve two or more voices that come into a dialogue, on the page, about the past and its bearing on the present. The voices are those of the poet herself, in the role of the person interrogating the past, and that of the woman whose story can be reconstituted once her own agency lies at the centre of the composition. We can read such poems as imagined interviews in a fieldwork that sees the poet in the role of an anthropologist, journalist, or archivist. For instance, Kamfer's *grond/santekraam*, departs from a historical fact: the forced removal and relocation of a fishing community in the 1980s. In *oorvertel 3 (retelling 3)*, an old woman reacts to questions about her past by granting the poet the right to re-tell her story with other words, at the same time claiming the ownership of her tale:

*dis beter om die storie in jou woorde oorvertel want ek wil graag
hou wat ek het dis al wat het ek as ek dit ook weggee is ek regtig
soos my kleinkind sal sê 'n happy loser*²⁰ (Kamfer 2011, 28)

The poetic I, wanting to re-constitute through imagination the voice and the stance of a ghosted, absent, dead woman, faces a resistance: the subject of the poem reclaims her agency not only in the face of the dominant historical discourses, but also by opposing the fictional strategy through which she surfaces in the poem. This countermovement is quite evident in Jolyn Phillips' *bientang. 'n !naugedig*²¹ (2020), a collection which departs from the fragile memory of a name and a figure, that of the last woman from the native group of the so-called beachcombers, recalled in a fish restaurant's name by a cave in Hermanus.

Phillips provides us with a poetic work (the collection reads as a single long poem) that tackles the problem of heritage in sociocultural terms by questioning the search for ancestry in slavery and native origins often claimed by the coloured community. A poetic I, who is the poet/archivist, engages in an enquiry into a heritage marked by the lack of tangible sources. In the present, the traces of the *last* beachcomber woman appear in forms—a ghost, a fossil—that eschew the common textual/visual archival items. To

19 The title of the collection, unpublished in English, translates “*ground/santekraam*,” whereby the word “*santekraam*,” roughly meaning “and all the rest,” stems from a 17th-century Dutch word.

20 “You better retell the story in your words because I prefer/to keep what I have it is all I have and if I give it away then I really am/as my grandchild will say a happy loser” [Translation by Francesca Terrenato].

21 The title of the collection, unpublished in English, translates “*bientang. a !naupoem*.” The term *!nau* indicates a traditional rite of passage in Khoi culture (Low 2008, 107–108), which, in the case of women, meant being isolated in a menstruation hut during their menses. *Bientang* is imagined as having suffered, and then voluntarily embraced, isolation throughout her whole life.

recover Bientang's voice, cultural memory must include the act of "re-membering" through oral lore, ancient beliefs, and poetic imagination. In the last pages of the book, though, she herself reacts to her own imprisonment in the fixity of the poet's words. In her enlightening article on *bientang*, Louise Viljoen (2020) points to these intense and destabilising final verses as a crucial key in the interpretation of the collection.

In her 2023 PhD thesis, Phillips herself provides insight into her research on the subject and into the theoretical and ethical issues she faced as a poet dealing with absence in the archive:

there were no primary texts to draw upon, written or spoken by people like Bientang herself. [...] [M]y research focus was on the indigenous people of the Overstrand. It is my way of commenting on the lack of archival resources on the indigenous people who lived there. The archival material I could find only made reference to the lives of the white settlers. (Phillips 2023, 103)

When asking herself about her "right to imagine" (Phillips 2023, 105) Bientang's story, thoughts, and words, Phillips reflects on the issue of re(-)presenting the subaltern's voice as problematised by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal text. Building on the idea of a *counter-epic*, she forms an interrogative relationship with her subject, within which she is free of "imagining her in re-imagined formulations" (Phillips 2023, 111) in her poetry. As Kamfer in her review effectively writes: "Bientang avoids the obvious routes to reach its destination, this isn't a slave's lament, praise song or folk tale, it's the inverse of those things. An epic poem told intimately and with humility" (Kamfer 2024, 8).

A handful of lines strikingly synthesise the archival issue by replacing the official historiographical discourse with the memory (personal, oral) of which women are the custodians. However, the memory of women, far from becoming history, is marginalised to the point of being even ousted by a naturalistic item, a shell:

*omdat jy 'n vrou is te veel van jou is geheue om
geskiedenis te wees
ja hier sal ek vrek hulle sal my bene vir houtgoed
gebruik
maar die skulpe sal hulle versamel uitstaal en bewaar
want 'n skulp se geheue is meer kosbaar as my versoekskrif²²*
(Phillips 2020, 64)

Summoning Ghosts, Preserving Names: Phillips and Julius

The surfacing in poetry of historical women from a more recent past has received less scholarly attention. In this incomplete overview, we may turn to the presence in recent

22 "Since you're a woman too much of you is memory/to be history/I will die here they will use my bones as/firewood/but the shells they'll collect, exhibit and guard them/because the memory of a shell is more precious than my plea" [Translation by Francesca Terrenato].

poems of two coloured women who are not totally effaced from cultural memory, but rather disempowered: jazz composer and singer Bea Benjamin and ANC activist Dulcie September. Benjamin, who died in 2013, is the subject of a poem from Phillips's first collection *radbraak*²³ (2017). Here, the archival issue revolves around the marginal role in which the woman artist is confined by the overwhelming stature of her husband, jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim aka Dollar Brand. The reference to the role she had in connecting the Dollar Brand Trio with Ellington is glossed by the question "is the rest history," followed by empty brackets ("is die res history []," Phillips 2017, 40). Those brackets encompass all that went *unrecorded* in the musical, cultural, and political archives: her own compositions, her dedication to the struggle as a coloured woman through the years of self-exile from South Africa, including the very first recording of her voice in a studio. A recording which, unreleased, went lost and resurfaced decades later (Kelley 2012, 152).

The lines play with musical terms such as "half-note," "caesura," "broken ballad," which imply her ghosting in history. This ghosting is literally referred to in the polysemous compound "spookkomposisie," ghostwriting in music and music composed by a ghost. She is called back into being in the voice of the I (Phillips is an accomplished singer, too):

*ek lees you note terug in my stem
ek volg die patroon van jou
gebreekte akkoorde jy is nie
'n dooie noot jy sing stukkend
die Afrika in jou jou sonate kom
van St Helenabaai jou stem
ongekomponeerde eensaamhede*²⁴
(Phillips 2017, 41)

In his *Ghosts of Archive*, Harris investigates what he names the "spectral content" of archival memory, in particular in South Africa: "There are always exclusions, and what has been excluded will whisper around the fragments. Ghostly voices" (Harris 2021, 60). He recalls, for instance, the case of Dulcie September's assassination and his vain efforts as an *archive activist* in trying to make public the secreted September record in the National Archives as late as 2001: "I am still haunted by Dulcie September and outraged at the way her family was ghosted by structures of a democratic state" (Harris 2021, 8). The activist, killed in Paris in 1988,²⁵ also fragmentarily surfaces in *David's Story* (2001) by Zoë Wicomb, in the margins of Sarah Baartman's story. Pumla Dineo

23 The title of the collection, unpublished in English, refers to the breaking wheel.

24 "I retrieve your note in my voice/I follow the pattern of your/broken chords you are not/a dead note you sing in pieces/the Africa in you your sonata comes/from St Helena Bay your voice/discomposed solitudes" [Translation by Francesca Terrenato].

25 Van Vuuren gives extensive information on the background of the murder in relation to September's investigation on the traffic of weapons between France and apartheid South Africa (Van Vuuren 2018, 209–216).

Gqola inscribes this figure in the flawed archives of resistance by black and coloured women. The elusive reference to Dulcie in the novel “points to the activity of alternate storying and suggests the ever-presence of sublimated histories of struggle which reside in spaces that do not easily give up meaning” (Gqola 2008, 58).

The activist’s haunting, absence/presence is also problematised in Lynthia Julius’s *Dulcie September* (Julius 2020, 22–23), from this young poet’s debut, *Uit die kroes*²⁶ (2020). Julius’s whole collection would be worth discussing as a restorative artistic challenge with lacunae in the archive, especially regarding coloured women. The re-dressing of memory begins by voicing the suffering of native women kept in the 17th-century Dutch East India Company fort and of enslaved women sold, raped, and beaten under the English colonial rule in the 19th century. The next step in women’s oppression is marked by the poem titled “1949” (Julius 2020, 21), which is followed by the one dedicated to Dulcie September, which leads to “1993,” year of birth of an “I” who has “just smelled apartheid” (Julius 2020, 24) but still needs to make out what the label “coloured” could mean in the present. *Dulcie September* deals with reading the history of the struggle in search of a place for coloured women. The “I” rummages in the fragments history leaves behind and picks them up in an attempt to update, to a more recent past, the issue of ancestry that has been too often relegated to the scanty Khoi and slavery archives. September, shot in the head by a still unknown hitman, is evoked in the scraps left at the site of her murder in Paris: the bullets, her bag, her hair, her false teeth. The attempt to piece her together, as a coloured woman who fought and sacrificed the chance of motherhood for the struggle, a woman who suffered, and still suffers, injustice, going unacknowledged in history books, can only rely on “*self op gaan soek*” (“go and look around on my own”). The poem is a plea for one’s right to become the archivist and investigate, as a woman and as a poet, the spectral content that the archive conceals, as well as stating the significance of calling, recalling, preserving women’s names in the present and for posterity, thereby imposing them on the mouths that refuse to pronounce them:

die wat jou moet ken, ken jou naam nie
*Dulcie, ek het dit nog nooit oor hulle tonge hoor uitrol nie*²⁷
 (Julius 2020, 23)

Conclusions

Contemporary poetry seems to offer readers and scholars the same “lively heterogeneity of style and speaking positions” that Elleke Boehmer finds in black women’s prose production when, drawing from Gayatri Spivak, she talks about “a ‘frontier style,’

26 The title of the collection, unpublished in English, translates “From the Frizzy Head.”

27 “those who should know you, ignore your name/Dulcie, I have never heard it roll on their tongues” [Translation by Francesca Terrenato].

favouring cross-hatched, fragmented, and choric forms” (1995, 227). The archive, broadly understood as a set of cultural memory items (documents, texts, images, monuments, films, and recordings) officialised by general consent, is constantly challenged by different selection processes when societies undergo radical changes. The exclusion of certain voices from the archive and the consequent amnesia or aphasia of memory concerning marginalised individuals and groups is a powerful source of inspiration in the poems analysed. Although the *nation* might still be the inescapable point of reference for cultural memory, new dimensions surface. The familial and local dimension of memory, and its transnational and global breadth, put the idea of a *national* history in perspective. This theme is crucial for the varied and controversial identities (the multiple *I*, the *us*, and the *them*) that emerge in this lyrical production.

These poems refuse to categorise and prioritise the actions and experiences in the past that are made meaningful for the present. They challenge the hierarchies informing the pre- and post-apartheid archives. When they do engage in issues of identity, they focus on the diversified agencies of women and acknowledge the trajectories of their singular paths and the unstable nature of their constraints and loyalties. In doing so, they provide a memorial site not only for forgotten deeds and words, but also for silence, passivity, and invisibility.

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