

# **Pumla Dineo Gqola interviewed by Grace A. Musila about *A renegade called Simphiwe* (2013) at the Open Book Festival, Cape Town, 8 September, 2013<sup>1</sup>**

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*Pumla Dineo Gqola is an associate professor of Literature in the Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand. She has published extensively on African literature, cultural studies and gender studies in addition to opinion pieces in various newspapers. **A renegade called Simphiwe** is her second book. She is also the author of a book entitled **What is slavery to me? Postcolonial slave memory in post-apartheid South Africa** (2010)*

**Grace A. Musila (GaM):** *Firstly, why *Simphiwe Dana*?*

**Pumla Dineo Gqola (PDG):** For a combination of reasons. For the spectacular way in which *Simphiwe Dana*'s genius is on display in her music. When she appeared on the scene it altered South Africa's musical and cultural landscape. The South African writer, Zukiswa Wanner, writing in a Kenyan newspaper many years ago, says 'Simphiwe is not a star, she is a planet.' But also I chose to write about *Simphiwe Dana* because of the various ways in which she occupies South Africa's public consciousness and the ways in which different publics and audiences respond to her. I found her incredibly compelling as a cultural figure of our time. She doesn't fit in just one category. She's not a musician who feels limited to speaking only about musical matters. She also speaks on language, on race, and other issues. She says difficult things, knowing that there's going to be a pushback. She takes risks about what she writes and speaks about, what she thinks out loud about. I am a feminist and I am a person who is drawn to people who are not tidy, who are not easily classifiable. Those people live out a certain freedom and it is not without consequences. I am fascinated by people who live like that, who are rebels, [and] especially by women who live their lives on their own terms. And for me, *Simphiwe Dana* seems to be someone who owns herself. She is true to what she desires, she takes creative and critical risks in a country/world [where it is difficult] for a woman to do that. Interestingly, most of these people are in the creative industry in South Africa right now. The book is part of a larger project of mine where I am trying to figure out what it is about South Africa that produces such people. As South African poet Lebo Mashile once said, there's something intriguing about South Africa right now, because it produces these women who are outspoken and unafraid – and at the same time, South Africa is very uncomfortable with precisely these

outspoken women. So, what is that contradiction? I am trying to understand it.

**GaM:** *I would like to hear your thoughts on this contradiction. In **A Renegade Called Simphiwe**, you talk about South Africa as being both very restrictive, with a very problematic range of ideas and attitudes towards women, especially black women, and at the same time, as a rich space that provokes and inspires a lot of creative energy. How do you explain this strange combination of both repression and inspiration?*

**PDG:** I think it is part of the untidy inheritance of living in Southern Africa at this time where, on the one hand, we have had incredibly successful women's movements whose legal successes come partly from a very strategic way of thinking around gender, sexuality and so on. On the other hand, something bizarre is happening in the region of Southern Africa where we have a rising and crystallising of violent masculinity. The creative, crazy, brilliant, daring, playful, renegade women that we see in Southern African are a product of our time, but at the same time we are living at a time where patriarchy is manifesting itself in the policing of women's bodies. The reason is because there is a history – or rather a herstory – of women like that; so, they are not out of step, they are not unusual. The crystallising public violent masculinities that we are seeing in Southern Africa (South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, etc.) are part of the backlash against that. I am moving from imagining that these women are kind of a wonderful surprise to thinking, actually, that what is strange is that there are not more of them. So what is preventing us from having more of them, given the rich history of such women we have had despite the incredibly brutal history for centuries? I am trying to find out what it is that prevents a larger surfacing of such women.

**GaM:** *I am curious about the patriarchal landscape that you have just described that is very harsh on women, and has this history of containing women. How does it play out in men's lives?*

**PDG:** I think it is about containing renegade, freer and more dynamic masculinities and femininities. If we look, we can find a range of exciting feminist masculinities in the cultural spaces and outside of that, but we can also see how those are being policed. There is a certain kind of creative, dynamic gender performance – whether masculine, feminine, transgendered – that is under siege in Southern Africa. So there is a lot of pressure to perform a violent masculinity in public and to police progressive masculinities too.

**GaM:** *A question about the genre of this book: What kind of book is it and why did you opt for this format? It is not quite a biography, and it is not quite an academic book, yet it has elements of both. It is very sophisticated, but in an accessible, conversational way. Why did you choose this format? What does it allow you to do and what are its limits?*

**PDG:** That is a big question. I don't think of it as a biography at all. It definitely is non-fiction, it is creative non-fiction. I wasn't interested in writing a biography. I would never write a biography about somebody I know and have a social relationship with. Also I didn't want to write a scholarly book because I wanted the freedom that comes with creative non-fiction. It is a book of essays and reflections on one of the most important

cultural figures alive in South Africa today. I wrote it in this way mainly because it is also one of the genres that I most enjoy reading and it is a genre that I enjoy writing. There is also an autobiographical element and I am quite conscious of that element, but there is not a biographical element in terms of my subject. I was not really interested in Simphiwe Dana's life per se. I was trying to think out loud about someone who I think is important in shaping what it means to be alive in South Africa today. You get a lot of biographies about contemporary male figures in South Africa, and also the sometimes exciting books about gangsters, and I was struck by the way South African writers – and I am not excluding myself – seem to think that we can only write two kinds of books about cultural figures: we can write coffee table books or we can write theses. I just thought coffee table books are fantastic and at the same time intellectual engagement is not the exclusive terrain of the academe, so I wanted a different kind of book. For example, at some point, I was hungry for a book about Brenda [Fassie] and I wish more books were written about Miriam Makeba, or about [the musician] Mandoza. We don't like writing books about cultural figures, and I think it has something to do with how we think about the imagination. We think influential people are scary 'Godfathery' figures and presidents and ministers, but I think there is a whole world in-between and a big part of who we are and the spirit of our time is shaped by cultural figures, by creative figures, and yet we are not writing about them in this way. So, that was a big part of why I chose this genre.

**GaM:** *Did it limit you in any way?*

**PDG:** No, actually I found it incredibly freeing.

**GaM:** *You describe the book as a portrait in words, and a conversation with Simphiwe and what she represents, so there is quite a bit of you in the book, expectedly. Do you think the book is also a portrait of the conversation between the two of you?*

**PDG:** Yes, I think of it as a conversation. It was important for me to think about her work critically and the place of her work in the world, so that is [the] intellectual part of it; but it was also important to me that it be a creative book, a writer's book. I am sure musicologists will produce fantastic books on her work and they should. So, yes, I think it is a conversation, but I am also increasingly drawn to conversations between different creative genres too, so, hopefully it is also a conversation about different kinds of creative presences in the country. That was a big part of what I was hoping for.

**GaM:** *I think that is what makes you and Simphiwe Dana so similar, because as a reader, I'm struck by what you do with the genre. You both represent a widening of the horizons of possibility, and taking of risks, and stepping out of the traditional assumptions on how we write, who we write for and about. You talk about Simphiwe's artistic community in the book, and raising this conversation with your own students. What stood out for me was when you talk about encouraging your students to think about pleasure as a space of critical consciousness. Please talk to us a bit on pleasure as a site of critical consciousness?*

**PDG:** I think it is both a benefit and build-up of my day job. When you are a literary scholar, you have great passion for creative and written forms – you read them, you

teach them, you discover them, it is this wonderful party for a lifetime; but at the same time, you take creative forms incredibly seriously; you think of creative forms as a site of knowledge creation; as a site of theorisation; as a site of abstraction. And so, I think it is incredibly obvious to me that teaching literature actually means teaching how to think about something that gives you pleasure very seriously. At the same time, we live in the midst of a language about the creative in South Africa right now, that says that pleasure is something frivolous. That when you go somewhere for some ‘serious’ business, you have a fantastic poet recite poetry while you chat to your friend, or a fantastic jazz artist performing in the background while you all eat, because the creative is like some beautiful wallpaper to the ‘serious’ stuff that drives the economy. Or that pleasure is like sex, or watching reality TV; it is frivolous stuff, unless you are a publisher, or a producer or creative worker. It bothers me that our public talk is about the creative as a frivolous space of escape. It bothers me because some of the most provocative thinking that we see in South Africa today is happening in the creative genres that we are not engaging.

**GaM:** *I found the idea of Simphiwe Dana as a ‘soft feminist’ very intriguing, because we have a generation of black women writers and artists who distanced themselves from the word feminism even though their work and thought was recognisably feminist in orientation. Why this need to qualify her feminism?*

**PDG:** I am the kind of feminist that thinks all our feminisms are qualified. There are anti-racist feminists and there are right-wing feminists and there are queer feminists and some of us call ourselves African feminists, etc. So, I think that all feminism is qualified. Sometimes we are upfront about how it is qualified and sometimes it we are not. I do not think of soft feminism as something that is opposed to hard feminism; or that it necessarily means a light-weight feminism. The main reason I use that specific one is because that is how she described herself.

**GaM:** *In closing, I would like to ask you about the question of contradictions, which is something [that] preoccupies you in **A Renegade Called Simphiwe**. What are your thoughts on the links between contradictions and the politics of transgression?*

**PDG:** I really think that being human is about managing contradictions. Of course there’s a point at which contradictions become hypocrisy, but that’s not the kind of contradiction I am drawn to. I think contradictions are a site of enormous freedom, possibility and creative production; so, I’m fascinated by contradictions. And I think that contradictions are policed heavily. We are supposed to be only one kind of thing, but any kind of categorisation is limiting and repressive.

**GaM:** *Thank you once again for this provocative book and for sharing your views on it here.*