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LESEGO “PAPA RAMPS” RAMPOLOKENG

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Horns for Hondo at 30: Introduction in three Fragments

WORDS **DANYELA DEMIR**
GUEST EDITOR

ORIGINAL PHOTO BY
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In his review of Lesego Rampolokeng's Bantu Ghost (2009), "Post-Freedom Dreams and Nightmares", reprinted in this special issue, Mphutlane wa Bofelo aptly writes that "one could not help but come to the conclusion that Lesego Rampolokeng is to literature and theatre what Fanon and Biko are to socio-political analysis and activism."

This powerful statement has always resonated with me and yet, whilst many full-length studies, special issues, and monographs on Biko and Fanon have been written (at times they have perhaps been over-written), this special issue is the first gathering of words which is primarily dedicated to Rampolokeng's oeuvre.

The various articles and pieces are attempts at commemorating, reflecting on, and engaging with Rampolokeng's oeuvre 30 years after the publication of his first book, Horns for Hondo in 1990.

My introductory reflections will hopefully provide a glimpse into themes that readers of Rampolokeng's work have been engaging with and beginnings of new conversations around his work, which we must carry forward on different platforms. The themes and concepts that I will attempt to reflect upon are by no means an exhaustive reading of his oeuvre, but rather ideas, sketches, and readings that are to me central in order to make sense of such a multi-layered and complex body of work. I will primarily engage with three to my mind central issues in his work: lineages and legacies, global Black Consciousness, and gender dynamics/writing women. The contributors of this special issue deal with other central themes in, and perspectives on, his work, such as the relevance of his early work for the present (Matthew Krouse), a detailed analysis of Horns for Hondo and Rampolokeng's craft of performing poetry (Andries Oliphant), writing from the margins/the writer as in/outsider whilst writing from within the centre back to the centre (Olivier Moreillon), the centrality of music and musicality for/in his work (Warrick Sony, Salim Washington, Sam Mathe, and myself). The importance of his writing as reflection of struggles of the oppressed and as mirror to society is what runs through all articles like a golden thread. However, although this special issue is an attempt at celebrating and thinking through multiple dimensions within Rampolokeng's oeuvre, it should only be seen as a momentous force to drive an ongoing conversation about his work and should thus be read as fragments, as ideas, and as beginnings of a more rigorous conversation about Rampolokeng's work and its significance for South African literary history.

FRAGMENT ONE: LINEAGES AND LEGACIES

One of the most fascinating things that I found about Rampolokeng's writing when I immersed myself in his oeuvre in 2017 was that I could hear a global gathering of rich echoes of artistic voices: Antonin Artaud, William Burrows, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and, perhaps more faintly, Sarah Kane and even Federico García Lorca. Most central to his oeuvre, however, are, as the narrator in Bird-Monk Seding (2017) says, Black artists with a "social conscience" (Rampolokeng, Bird-Monk 18). The narrator, Bavino Sekete, in fact provides us with Rampolokeng's artistic lineage when he explains:

> I came to black consciousness via Mafika Gwala. I carry Aimé Césaire in my head. Frantz Fanon is my father. Burroughs is central as daddy formal innovator, plus. [...] My ghetto-youth bibles: Mtutuzeli Matshoba's '*Call Me Not a Man*' and Mbulelo Mzamane's '*Mzala*'. Matshoba first dealt with ghetto reality at whitelight, searing, excoriating, burn-the-place-clown line-them-up-I'll-shoot-them level. Mzamane made me realise that life grows, even at the most despicable, revolting, clown-in-the-sewer-sucking-on-faecal-matter level. My gutter anthem was the ultimate poem of my black consciously-reaching-for-selfhood clays, '*Afrika My Beginning*' by Ingoapele Madingoane. (Bird-Monk 17-18)

This rich lineage is what I find challenging and fascinating at the same time. For the dedicated reader, Rampolokeng's work is a chance and a call to enrich ourselves both in fictional and critical writing. I found myself going back to familiar texts, such as Fanon and Artaud, and studying rigorously texts previously not known to me, such as Mafika Gwala's poetry and Aimé Césaire's writings. However, Rampolokeng's writing, though it is a form of teaching, is by no means didactic. Many of his works are not only commentaries on the socio-economic state of the oppressed (particularly in South Africa), but also lessons in art. (We must remember wa Bofelo's poignant quote [at] the beginning of my introduction.) I have tried to grasp this particular phenomenon in Rampolokeng's work, to give it a name, a definition (as of course most academics would). One could, of course, simply say that the author is using intertextual and intermedial devices, that, like every other text, Rampolokeng's work is a palimpsest. However, I feel that that would create a gap, that it would not do the call to remember and commemorate his lineage justice. I thus suggest calling the tracing of his own lineage and the legacy he is leaving for himself and us as readers 'lyrical criticism'. His commentary on the arts, his teachings of writers both from the margins and the centre through references and allusions, are always delivered in poetic form. Lyrical criticism is a hybrid genre, situated at the interstice of poetry and critical engagement within cultural and literary studies.

It resists and defies academic conventions. Simultaneously, it consists of cultural, artistic and philosophical theory on a level which must be regarded as at least as valuable and significant for literary and cultural studies as more canonical approaches to theory. I find two of Rampolokeng's works particularly striking in this regard: *Bantu Ghost* and *A Half Century Thing*.

Wa Bofelo rightly points out that Bantu Ghost "started as a tribute to Steve Biko but ended as homage to black thinkers who have made a contribution to theorisation on the Black experience" (wa Bofelo 2020). The play is thus not only an elegy to Steve Biko, but also a rich archival monument to other Black thinkers across the globe, such as Frantz Fanon, Sonia Sánchez and Aimé Césaire, to name but a few. Like inscriptions in a monument, quotes by these and other thinkers are woven into Rampolokeng's own poetry *(Rampolokeng, Bantu Ghost pp. 13-15)* and thus form a lineage of writers that inform his thinking, his political stance, and that point the readers to these thinkers so that we may learn and remember/commemorate this particular artistic legacy, and by implication, form a part of it, be it as writers, teachers, or critics.

Rampolokeng uses similar techniques of tracing his lineage and in this case perhaps leaving his own legacy in print in his 2015 poetry volume A Half Century Thing. The cover is an image of Phefeni in Orlando West, Rampolokeng's birthplace, and in "*Theatric Sticks & Powdered Bones*" he speaks about his birthplace when the lyrical I says: "*so … I took to Staffriding … all the way from Phefeni to HERE*" (Rampolokeng, Half Century 82). The volume also is a celebration of Rampolokeng's 50th birthday and the 25th anniversary of the publication of Horns for Hondo, all indications that this book is not only speaking of legacies that other writers have left behind, but also of his own.

A Half Century Thing is lyrical criticism that engages with various themes, such as (South) African literary history, hip-hop, oppression, inequality and the quotidian lives of Black people. Perhaps the strongest section of the book are the poems for South African poets Keorapetse Kgositsile *("Base for bra Willie")*, Mafika Gwala *("Libation Blues for Mista Gwala")*, Mongane Wally Serote *("Word to Serote")*, and Seitlhamo Motsapi *("Earth Shallow (Solo for Seitlhamo")*. The poems do not only allude to music through their titles, but are crossing genres in form and style. They are praise songs and partly resurrections of texts that have been largely neglected in South African literary history. Although both Kgositsile and Serote have been, through their status as poets laureate more 'visible' in the South African literary landscape, there have been few engagements with particularly their earlier works and most of their works from the 70s and 80s are out of print.

Mafika Gwala has been hopelessly understudied and were it not for South African History Online, his work would have been unavailable to the current generation of readers. I am not aware of a full length study of Gwala's work, although, as Warrick Sony mentions in his piece published in this special issue, Rampolokeng is currently writing a PhD on Gwala's oeuvre, thus ensuring that Gwala's importance not only be stressed in the form of lyrical criticism, but also in somewhat more 'conventional' academic circles.

Seitlhamo Motsapi is perhaps the least known of the four writers. He has written one book of poems and has since not been a central figure in the South African literary landscape. Rampolokeng's four poems/lyrical dedications are, much like Bantu Ghost, an archival preservation, a repository of knowledge, a tapestry of commemoration and remembrance as a tribute to otherwise marginalised voices and texts.

FRAGMENT 2: BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AS A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

In a conversation between Mafika Gwala and Lesego Rampolokeng, Gwala states that we need a "better Black Consciousness" (Gwala and Rampolokeng 2014). Both him and Rampolokeng agree that it is important to think of Black Consciousness in a global context. Gwala stresses that:

Vietnam was an essential part of our struggle. Because from there we could learn something like black consciousness should not be around colour. It should be around the natural struggle of people wanting identity themselves as a whole. Same with the Cubans. The Cubans taught us that we had to stand on our own because we wouldn't liberate ourselves if we always thought that some people were doing it for us. And it even came to Cuito Cuanavale. Cuito Cuanavale taught us that now was the dead-end street. There was no going further. It meant open confrontation with the system, against the system.

The people of Guinea Bissau, they taught us lots of things. They taught us tolerance. They were divided, a diverse society actually. But within that society they sought unity and they readily found it because they were honest with their principles. (Gwala and Rampolokeng 2014)

Rampolokeng's work embraces and carries forward Gwala's philosophy of looking outward from within. As a middle Eastern woman who grew up in Germany, I am often struck by how much his work – although, of course, rooted in South Africa – speaks to me beyond my present context of being at home in South Africa. I remember clearly how I was transported back to Rostock in 1992 when listening to Rampolokeng and the Kalahari Surfers' *Bantu Rejex*, which I write about in more detail in my piece on the eponymous album published in this special issue. I felt a sense of solidarity and a shared refusal to forget the tragedy and injustice of Rostock.

In *Horns for Hondo* the lyrical I says "Israel Is fresh in my mind & a god that left carnage behind only to push it to the Palestinian front to make another nation bear the brunt I weep for Palestine & humanity turned bovine" (Rampolokeng, Horns 33, original emphasis). These are only two of many instances of solidarity, of grief for the oppressed, and anger against oppression in the world. I have only chosen examples that speak particularly to me and my context.

But Rampolokeng's work is constantly inward- and outward looking at the same time, that is to say, although the setting is more often than not local, the text looks out into the world and is a testimony of Rampolokeng's direct literary and political lineage to Gwala's definition of Black Consciousness. It is therefore not surprising that Rampolokeng's work speaks to a global readership, that those of us who have experienced violence, oppression, and racial denigration elsewhere can relate to his words. To my mind, this global solidarity, both on an artistic as well as on a political level, is a hopeful, empowering, and propelling aspect of his work that has often been overlooked by critics.

It is this global outlook which makes me return to Rampolokeng's work time and again, often in moments of crises and despair, such as when an explosion hit Beirut on the 4th of August 2020. I reread "*Lines for Vincent*" (1998) and think of the revolution and the subsequent betrayal that many people in Beirut have felt before, but particularly after the 4th of August.

Dima Chami writes about this in her contribution to this special issue. She draws on the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's description of Beirut in the 80s and how timely it still is for the present, and I am reminded of how timely Rampolokeng's earlier work still is for contemporary South Africa.

Other scholars and critics will perhaps take up the task of comparing the contexts of Beirut and South Africa, differences and parallels in the writings of Rampolokeng, Darwish, and other poets from both countries. I, however, felt, if not comforted, then at least not alone in my grief and the knowledge that, perhaps, through global solidarity not only on social media and quickly fading posts, but in poetry, we could be on a journey which entails what José Esteban Munoz calls "communal mourning" (Munoz 73), a global mourning, perhaps.

This global grief, then, which arises from a place of love for each other as oppressed people, has, as has been evident in the global movement of Black Lives Matter and in global solidarity with Palestine, for instance, led and must further lead to global solidarity and militancy. Here Douglas Crimp's words, although spoken in a different context, come to my mind: "Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning and militancy" (Crimp 18). So then, might this be what Gwala is demanding of us when he says we need a "better Black Consciousness", which is echoed in Rampolokeng's oeuvre?: A global togetherness in grief, mourning, solidarity, and ultimately, a call for action.

I see Rampolokeng's gestures of moving

outward, both in terms of socio-political commentary and drawing on a rich legacy of cultural thinkers as a step forward within the (South) African literary landscape.

Of course, Rampolokeng is joint by other voices in this endeavour, although they vary vastly in style and technique. Zoë Wicomb, interviewed in this special issue by Lorraine Sithole on her latest novel *Still Life* (2020), and Busuku's forthcoming book, "And, in those Honeyed Regions", from which excerpts are also published in this special issue are further examples. However, there remain questions and reflections to be made on what a "better Black Consciousness" might look like in more detail in order to move forward.

How can we achieve a 'better", or perhaps 'different' black consciousness that draws on both Gwala's and Rampolokeng's thinking and that builds on it further? Thus, when Busuku's child character in "The Impaled Night Sky" (2020) asks the simple yet profound question: "Are we there yet?", we cannot yet respond in the affirmative, but perhaps we can say that we will be getting there.

Fragment 3: Writing Women

I began engaging with Rampolokeng's oeuvre in 2017 and I remember many conversations which started on a light note and ended with a taste of discomfort. Often, when particularly women writers asked me what my area of research was and I responded that I had been thinking of writing a monograph on Rampolokeng's oeuvre, the response was more often than not: "Why? He is violent. The writing is sexist. The language misogynistic."

After a time of not being quite able to express what caused my discomfort with this response, I felt, and still feel, that it is two things which I, as a scholar of Rampolokeng's work, have had to grapple with. Firstly, and this is easier for me to respond to than the second aspect, I felt that many times readers, particularly of poetry it would seem, conflate the writer and the person (and in Rampolokeng's case there is a third level of conflation happening, namely the performer, that is to say the stage persona with the man himself). My view is that, to reiterate what Olivier Moreillon also stresses in his piece on Blue V's in this special issue in line with Roland Barthes, the author is dead. It is tempting to conflate Rampolokeng the performer on stage who 'takes up space' and who exudes a more than self-confident aura during his readings with the person off stage and the lyrical I in his poetry and the first person narrators in his novel(s), which I would argue is yet another level, but I agree with the British playwright Sarah Kane that "if they don't know what to say about the work, they go for the writer" (Kane and Rebellato).

The second issue is less easy to put aside. It is a question that arises both out of the conversations I described in the beginning of this fragment and through having studied Rampolokeng's oeuvre for almost four years now: What happens to women in his writing? How does he write women? Am I, as a woman of colour, disturbed by the representation of women? Of equal importance is the question as to why there is a silence, a haunting gap, almost a refusal to write about gender issues and the representation of women in Rampolokeng's oeuvre by critics across gender and race. Because I find this gap more jarring and disquieting than some of the graphic content in Rampolokeng's oeuvre, but more so because the women in his oeuvre haunt and fascinate me in equal measure, I must attempt to begin to fill this gap, to speak about the women.

Unlike many women I have spoken to, it is not the violent language which unsettles me throughout Rampolokeng's oeuvre. Reading words like "fucking", "bitch", and "cunt" does not cause outrage in me as a reader. Reading violent sexual scenes does not shock me as much as it perhaps does other readers. After all, I read Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and Philip Ridley long before I encountered a single poem by Rampolokeng. No, it is not what most women feel who (almost) feel repulsed by his writing that disturbs me. I find it much more disquieting to read moments during which women are abused and brutalised and to, at times, feel a gap in the writing, a lack of empathy and compassion on the part of the narrators. In Blackheart, for instance, which is Rampolokeng's first published novel, the following scene leaves me cold and trembling:

> *she's near breaking point. let her break. shatter.*
> *fragment. Million bloodsplashedpieces. i watch her.*
> *i've done all bleeding week.*
> *through the lens her face is drawn. stretched out.*
> *tight. death mask.*
> *she looks around. furtive. time after bleeding time*
> *she darts her eyes*
> *around. a trapped mouse. i feel her fear. touch her*
> *fright. smell her*
> *panic. the taste of it in my mouth. my stomach*
> *rumbles. thunder*
> *coming to her. a mad train. hurtling through time*
> *caught in a*
> *jammed moment. electric failure. avalanche.*
> *stampede. rockfall. she*
> *looks at me. straight. she can't see me though her*
> *eyes are wide.*
> *graves. dark is my friend. she's a deer. frightened.*
> *those eyes are*
> *going to pop. i can make them pop. burst. explode.*
> *scatter to hit the*
>
> *distant wall. (Rampolokeng, Blackheart 6)*

This (surreal) scene of violence is particularly jarring because the violence seems gratuitous, because the readers do not know about the relationship of the couple before this scene. It is also disconcerting because the narrator derives pleasure from the woman's fear and vulnerability. He displays an unsettling "libidinal investment in violence" (Hartman 6) while the woman is frightened to death.

The scene is also distressing because the narrator is cold and unmoved by the murder he is about to commit or that he desires to commit. I say desires because in an unexpected twist it turns out that it might be the woman who murdered the man *(Rampolokeng, Blackheart 8)*. Thus, the readers are left wondering as to what really happened, as to whether this scene is 'real' at all or whether it is a no less frightening, but mere wishful desire on the narrator's part.

Other scenes where women are central to the narrative are even less clear cut. Bird-Monk Seding describes a terrifying gang rape of a young girl when the narrator, Bavino Sekete, remembers his childhood:

> *Happiness, all good & nice in the neighbourhood.*

Hormonal riot coming on, we went there & got into it, making out. That was the night of my vaginal circumcision. Odd as it may seem. I took a thrust, pain shot through my groin, like dynamite blasting my crotch. Like some razor had gone slash in my loins. I left the place with blood on my pants-front & flowing from under my eye cos then, these guys, friends of mine, came in & stuck an Okapi in my back, demanding that i get off so they could get on, wanting to run train. Memories of shit i would rather drop except to say i got cut, the one with the knife was trying to poke my eye out, i think. Well, they too carry reminders of that night. We all do, hearts heavy with piled-up crap. (Rampolokeng, Bird-Monk 8)

I ask myself, along with different friends who have read the novel: What of the girl? What happened to the girl? We know what happens to the narrator, but where is she? And now, when I read *Bird-Monk Seding* and *Whiteheart* side by side -for I have realised that this is how I must read Rampolokeng's novels, which can be read as three books in one- I find her. I have spoken about her often. But only now do I realise that it is the same girl because the gang rape scenes in Whiteheart and *Bird-Monk Seding* are so similar. The difference is, however, that the younger narrator in Whiteheart, the child through whose eyes we see the gang rape happening, is more empathetic, in search for answers as to what happens to the girl, than the more mature, distanced, and perhaps jaded narrator in *Bird-Monk Seding*.

So, what happens to the girl? Who is she? The girl who, as I write elsewhere about Vincent in "*Lines for Vincent*" (1998), seems to melancholically haunt Rampolokeng's texts (Demir forthcoming)? In Whiteheart, the readers find out that the girl's father rapes and violates her in unspeakable ways and that she, in an act of what John Berger in a different context describes as "undefeated despair" (2006), proceeds to season and cook the dead body of her tormentor after he mysteriously dies -or she might have killed him; the readers are presented with two versions- whilst raping her, a horrifying, graphic moment of melancholic incorporation of a lost, in this case perhaps never had, object of love. However, she is stopped in her tracks. The narrator states:

working away like the cook she'd been since early childhood for a long time while the neighbours drawn by the foul stench of it all came pounding on the doors. but they hadn't done that when he'd been causing her pain. they knocked shouted & then broke down the door to find her laughing & crying aloud into the night. it hasn't dawned yet. she's in the mental asylum. i was there. they call it a centre for the rehabilitation of the mentally handicapped. she's no mental cripple. disturbed they call it at times. but it goes beyond mere disturbance for me. way away & beyond even an upheaval. it's more than one long eternal psychological explosion at work on that human system. it goes deeper than any psychiatry textbook will ever delve to explore.

(Rampolokeng, Whiteheart 9)

Here moments of empathy and grief for the girl are clearly visible on the narrator's part. The horrific violence that she experiences at the hands of her father and other men is clearly edged in his body and mind. And yet, it is unsettling that the girl remains unnamed, that she eventually seems to disappear because the narrator does not see her in the psychiatric ward when he is there, and that this disappearance is mimicked in Bird-Monk Seding, for her story has faded from the pages, replaced by the narrator's trauma after having witnessed the gang rape.

The last woman I must write about has a name: Bongi, the woman in the eponymous poem which was published in The *Bavino Sermons* (1999 [2019]). "Bongi" tells the story of her and her lover in exile and their return to South Africa. And although the story is narrated to the lyrical I by Bongi's unnamed lover, it is of Bongi's hardships during the armed struggle in exile that the readers learn:

[...] when the bullets flew, when the bombs raged she gave birth
in the bush, wrapped the child in an army shirt plucked from a dead
guerilla, after washing it in the drinking water from her canteen.
the second child she gave birth to in a refugee settlement makeshift hospital
while her comrade kept guard.

(Rampolokeng, Sermons 83)

Bongi endures multiple traumas during her time as a soldier, but despite this, her fighting spirit seems unbroken:
a face as red as the waste between her legs
came into her view in her rifle's sights and she swabbed it. another one
tried to dive and her bullet helped it on its way.

(Sermons 83)

Bongi reminds me of a painting by Dumile Feni - called "*Untitled*" – of a Black woman holding a rifle in one hand and carrying her baby in the other. The poem might be the lyrical interpretation of Feni's painting. However, while the painting does not speak about the woman's homecoming, the poem does. It is a homecoming shadowed by betrayal, death, and brokenness.

Bongi's lover returns into the arms of his former lover, walks out on her and their two children. This betrayal does to Bongi what war could not do: It crushes her mental health. Or perhaps it heightens Bongi's traumatic experiences and brings them to the fore. Upon realising that things cannot be the same with his erstwhile lover, the father of Bongi's children returns home only to find that Bongi killed the girls and attempted suicide herself. The tragic scene is narrated in all its horrifying details, but without judgment for the lyrical I stresses that

"his leaving blew bongi's sanity to shreds. she didn't know his coming"

(Sermons 84).

And yet, despite the loss of her sanity, Bongi displays a shattering, tragic moment of undefeated despair -much like the girl in Whiteheart- when she is "hurling "inkatha" in his face before she passed out." (Sermons 84). The bitterly ironical juxtaposition of inkatha, a symbol of unity, and the irretrievably broken home of the protagonists is an unspeakable moment of loss and tragedy of such horrifying proportions that I cannot find the words to accurately speak to the poem. But Bongi speaks. That one word – inkatha – symbolises the hopes she might have had for her family to live in peace and unity after the traumatic years of war. Simultaneously, it speaks of unbearable, bitter, angry disappointment caused by her lover's betrayal.

Like the girl in Whiteheart, Bongi is taken to a psychiatric institution. This raises a final question which I must ask myself: Why are these two women who have haunted me throughout reading Rampolokeng's work cast away into a psychiatric institution? Perhaps it is because society fears precisely this undefeated despair which both women have in their spirits despite being physically and mentally broken by the world, by men. I am not sure whether this is the answer, or whether I will find answers to my question.

However, I know that I will continue to grapple with it beyond these pages, that I must continue speaking about the women, these two and Vincent's mother in "*Lines for Vincent*", and other women in *Blackheart*, and Mmaphefo in *Bird-Monk Seding*. And, of course, when I think of the women I must also ask myself about different representations of masculinity in Rampolokeng's work. However, for now, this fragment on women is an invitation for other readers and critics to embark with me on this journey.

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Acerbic poems of Lesego Rampolokeng: *Horns for Hondo - Introduction*

REPRINT

WORDS **ANDRIES OLIFANT** IMAGE **IAIN EWOK ROBINSON**
EASTERN STAR, ERHINI, 2015

I first came into contact with the poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng in the course of 1989 when wads of handwritten manuscripts arrived at my desk. An envelope scrawled with a large assertive handwriting contained reams of short acerbic poems. The wry humour, fused with a passionate sense of indignation and an inclination towards the grotesque and surreal Image struck me.

Thus in one of his first poems published in STAFFRIDER magazine, significantly titled "Rotten", he wrote:

Here is a dog whose like tore its entrails out.

Here is man whose like tore his soul out.

They both stink.

The devastating equations and moral judgement presented in this poem and the social context which constitutes its genesis and implications are inescapably South African. It is related to the world evoked and denounced by poets such as Oswald Mtshali, Wally Serote and Mafika Gwala.

This world of human degradation, produced by what Rampolokeng in "rap 16" characterizes as "the land of the racial staircase / strung from an inhuman base", does not simply involve a hierarchical classification of human beings. It also refers to a situation in which people are tramped upon and trampled. The social order is premised on violence and murder. Every sphere of social life and every turn in history is haunted by horror. Walter Benjamin's thesis that "every document of civilization is simultaneously a document of barbarism" is

particularly apt with regard to Rampolokeng's work. The stains of dehumanisation, splashed over and seeped into the social and psychological fabric of South Africa, are made visible in his poetry:

when one seeks another's domination he becomes an abomination vile as the devil's corruption impure of mind as an abortion I was born not vomited but inhumanity was excreted if man's freedom is a life distant to give mine be content (rap 2)

It is therefore not surprising, that the overriding tone of Rampolokeng's work is revulsion and condemnation of this dehumanising order. His denouncement couched in biblical and judicial imagery is unremitting. This is so even when he strikes a humorous cord. The only irony he allows himself and us is directed at those who pose as literary arbitrators. He presents himself as "the people's transmitter" and pre-emptively rejects any redirection of his voice:

dear lesego if you want us to give you an ear tell us something we want to hear make the deed supercede the motive our applause will be explosive dance action more than dense thought is what is more often bought make our minds drown our hands will give you a crown nothing that lingers in the mind is what we flock behind replace your pocketsful of hope with buckets full of dallas soap ag man polemics is mos nie poetry

ii

give our minds toiletry (letter)

This double-edgedness constitutes the matrix of Rampolokeng's work. It is governed by the desire to restore lost dignity and delves into the nature of human debasement. It is also fired by the urge to debunk liberal aesthetics with its one-sided Insistence on a socially alienated individuality, in collusion with the notion of the writer as producer of cultural commodities. This notion postulates a carricatured notion of the collective as an "uncultured mass" which is little more than a market for cultural trash from which the privileged are exempt by virtue of their special status, taste and discrimination. In poetry this is formulated in terms of a stress on the formal at the expense of everything else. Rampolokeng appropriates the insistance on a sterile formalism as a frame through which he speaks in the subversive voice of a poet-preacher. His voice rises from the ranks of a movement in which literature is intertwined with the private and public concerns of a people absorbed in the struggle to end the nightmare of oppression. So where does Rampolokeng come from? Where is he heading? Where does he want to take his readers and those to whom he recites his work? Where does he fit into the fractured and factional framework of local poetry? Being published by the Congress of South African Writers should settle questions concerning the social tendencies and preoccupations in his work. Often obsessed with the past and its accumulated injustices, his poetry is nevertheless forward looking. At the heart of his strident denouncements a sigh, a longing, a desire for a healed, harmonious life rises:

in the beginning east and west met in africa the black continent grew darker the moon hid the sun in eclipse the land's cries were epics what was yesterday's music is today futuristic gone and still to come is the song of the wind

iii

chaining man's soul is the modern trend lost and still to be found is man in harmony with creation (rap 22)

If his poetry deploys the rhymed couplet, this stands in direct contradiction to traditional rhyme free praise poems structured by internal repetitions, parallelisms, chiasmusims, inversions, and couplings. But like all oral work his poetry is centred around the concrete inter-human and social struggles and is at its most forceful in a performative setting. This formal and thematic syncretism is striking. His work, formally at least, re-enacts at a much later juncture the struggles which earlier indigenous poets encountered In the process of moving from traditional oral based forms to some of the conventions favoured by a now superannuated Western poetry. This tension is also evident in the moral flavour and radical tone of his poetry. It encodes the struggles of all colonized people in the quest to overthrow the shackles of domination. In speech it involves the compulsion to expose the moral unacceptability of oppression and the need for change articulated in terms understandable by the oppressor. These forces at work in Lesego's poetry render it more than mere protest and moral outrage. It postulates a world different to the one we presently inhabit:

when I'm rapmaster supreme word-bomber in the extreme I'm called subversive when I'm only creative i write to fight to make a dark land bright they say I'm kinky when I'm only inky raise objection & get a rejection from them of the hard rule that rule like a mad bull

iv

saying I've got a mental infection should get a lead injection but they came sailing in a ship to make me bleat like a sheep now they drive up in a van to silence me with a ban (rap 31)

Lesego Rampolokeng was born in Orlando West, Soweto where he schooled before taking up studies in law at the University of the North. He started writing in high school and retains the vivid recollection of the traditional Sesotho praise poetry, the dithoko, contemporary popular Sesotho music in which the singer talk-sings the lyrics accompanied by instrumental music. This is of course related to dub poetry which developed from the "toasting" practices of reggae DJs. This became a popular form whereby poetry is presented to a drum and bass beat. Caribbean Dub poets from Britain and Jamaica, such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mutabaruka, are cited by Rampolokeng as specific influences in his work.

This syncretism extends to the rap music originated within the North American and other European urban ghettoes by people of African decent. With Rampolokeng, as with some of the dub poets, there is, however, no need for musical accompaniment. Like the Caribbean poet Oku Onoura who stresses the inherent reggae rhythms evident when performed unaccompanied by music, Rampolokeng emphasises:

"I have no need for music when I perform my poetry for there is an inherent musicality to my poetry." This musicality in his work is, however, not directly moulded on the reggae rhythms or the polyglot linguistic derivations of Caribbean dub poetry. Although he occasionally inserts phrases from the indigenous languages and Afrikaans into his verses, standard english predominates. His poetry is, however, reminiscent of popular rap lyrics which emerged in the United States and Britain in the 1980s. It is presented with a less explicitly musical rhythm which indicates its links with indigenous forms of praise singing, This is evident in the regularity of metre coupled with measured variations in his verse. It results in verses which range from extended ten-beat to four-beat rhythms. The acoustically structured rhymes and the verbal effusion form the backbone of this poetics. In performances the scrawny, gaunt faced and intense poet, stands with all his weight on one leg, occasionally shifting it to the other, presenting the raps In a rich voice fluctuating between historical narration and shrill invective, exhortative tones. The overall presentation is characterised by an internal rhythmic consistency. He blends formal surface with moral passion to produce a lyricism which is at once Instructive and entertaining. This collection brings together fifty raps and a number of shorter poems by Rampolokeng and highlights the narrative and lyrical strands In his work. It is a collection In which the feelings, sensibilities and indignation of a generation, reared in the death throes of domination, finds a social critical perspective rooted in the need for an alternative affirmative articulation.

***Introduction - Horns for Hondo.* By Andries Walter Oliphant, Johannesburg 1990. Reprinted with permission.**

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REFLECTION

Horns for Hondo: Poetry's Fragile Truce

WORDS MATTHEW KROUSE

IMAGE ROB SLOETRY COVELL, POETRY AFRICA 2015

The publication of Lesego Rampolokeng's Horns for Hondo was not in itself an exceptional moment. The terrain had been set for its arrival by the proliferation of struggle poetry books from publishers like Ravan Press, Skotaville and others. And within the Congress of South African Writers, the cult of Mzwakhe Mbuli had lent credence to the idea of a viable 'people's poetry' with the sale of approximately 10 000 copies of Before Dawn at political rallies and trade union meetings.

Renoster Books had published Mongane Wally Serote's Yakhal'Inkomo in 1972 and, as a young person beginning to look at issues, I was struck dumb when I read the contents, finding a poem called What's in this Black 'Shit'. No question mark, coupled with such filth in a title, confronted me with a reality I had not known through poetry as an artery to the heart. Thrown in one's white face was the fact that in the direct address there was nothing nicely poetic happening, what with the poet experiencing uninteresting violence at home when his dad hit his sister for spilling sugar; and the banality of uttering a swear word to the cops at the pass office.

The themes of bad home life and standing up to authoritarianism would be present in the works of Dambudzo Marechera (and in Lesego's later novels), which I'd read by the time we met, so we had something in common. I knew nothing of Ingoapele Madingoane who Lesego introduced me to with amusement. But of course we all knew Linton Kwezi Johnson and Mutabaruka who are mentioned in Andries Walter Olifant's introduction to Horns for Hondo - they were the standard inspirations of the time.

I recall a hefty manuscript from a neurotic poet. The original pages made such a huge pile, and the writer was so guarding of it, that editing it was clearly going to be a formidable task. One proposed individual had already dropped out, and none of the seniors at the Cosaw office seemed to want to brave Lesego's ire, or hurt his feelings.

So it was down to me. I was given one hundred pages. I had to ask what Hondo meant. Together Lesego and I squashed his universe into a matchbox. For 30 years I have known that the book is named in rap 7 where Lesego seems to arrive home from a surrealistic exile, to a bullet-ridden, wrecked village drowning in blood. He then moves on to the ghetto, and stoops to the ground where he kisses a calabash.

In Horns for Hodo there is a circular motion that begins with sunrise (in the morning), and ends with sunrise (end-beginnings). The circularity is reflected in the round visual motif of a man with a megaphone that runs throughout the book. The raps themselves present us with difficult truths rounded off into rhyming couplets. The page numbers are encircled. The entire text is audaciously designed in a rounded bold typeface, which caused the printer, who was Scottish, to exclaim loudly upon seeing it, "Ats boold! Ats all boold!"

But, we said, everything must stand out.

The cover, designed and illustrated by Andrew Lord, is masculine, robust and bloody, totally unlike its poet.

Once the book, as well as others by Keorapetse Kgositsile, Mongane Wally Serote, Sankie Nkondo (now Mtembu-Mahanyele) and Zinjiva Nkondo had been published, I was sent with them to the Frankfurt Book Fair. It was 1990 and the Berlin Wall had fallen. The book fair was a celebration of reunification, as well as of German-Japanese relations. Jessie Duarte, who had been to the book fair before, wrote me a long point-by-point memo of how to handle Frankfurt. But it was difficult.

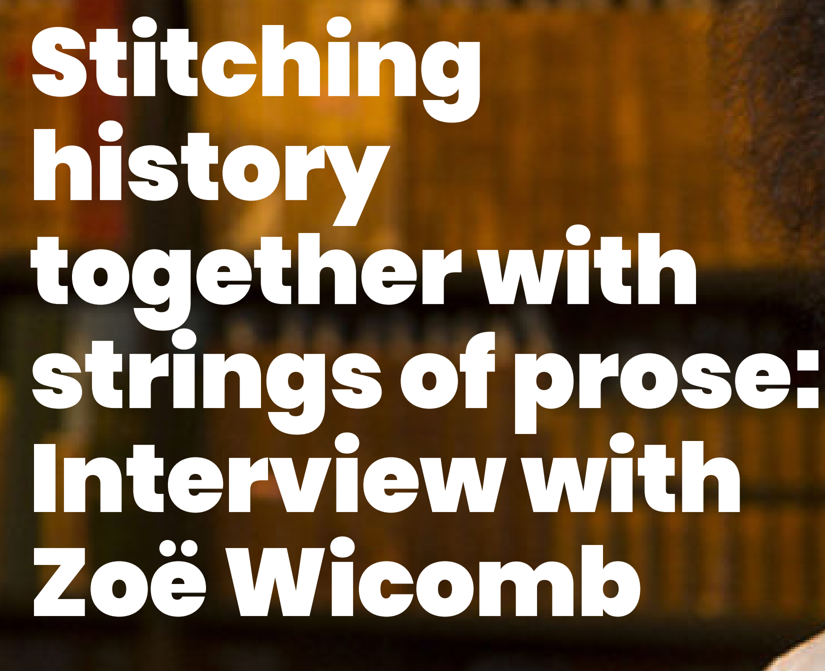
I called Johannesburg and told the comrades at Cosaw that I was not managing alone. They called Sankie Nkondo, who was the ANC's chief representative in Bonn, and she sent over two nuns who had been active in the anti-apartheid movement to help me out.

So there we sat, the nuns and I, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, in the Cosaw booth surrounded by South African struggle literature. Many of the books had Kalashnikovs and socialist-looking motifs on their covers.

Frustrated former East Germans bombarded us with questions and answers, telling us that we didn't know what sort of system we were courting.

Poetry is like a person. It is born into one world and dies in another. As a child it appears fresh and ready, and then becomes jaded and useless in years that follow. Whether it can stand on its own in its old age is the ultimate test of its longevity, or whether it will end up looking old fashioned and ridiculous. But Lesego's Horns for Hondo maintains its cool, and continues to reflect the brittle mystery of its creator, and the potential of its moment. I'm glad to have been associated with it.

MATTHEW KROUSE began in the 1980s making alternative theatre, which got him banned by state censors. Later, he trained in book publishing and worked for the Congress of South African Writers among others. He functioned as Arts Editor of Mail & Guardian newspaper from 1999 to 2014. He has co-written movies, and has edited books including the international art book Positions on politics and art (2010). More recently he has written and consulted in the gallery sector.



Stitching history together with strings of prose: Interview with Zoë Wicomb

WORDS **LORRAINE SITHOLE**
PUBLISHER, RED SOIL PUBLISHING

IMAGE **WINDHAM CAMPBELL PRIZES**

Zoë Wicomb is the author of *You Can't Get Lost* in Cape Town, David's Story (winner of the M-Net prize), Playing in the Light and The One That Got Away. She lives in Glasgow where she is Emeritus Professor at the University of Strathclyde. In 2013 she was awarded Yale's inaugural Windham Campbell Prize for fiction.

> *"What do I know beyond what the history books say? Does the woman think me omniscient? Her words leave me impotent, tongue-tied. Frankly, I have no idea what to do; I do not know how to proceed"*
>
> *Still Life: Zoe Wicomb*

LS: In Still Life, you do not move far from identity politics, but you examine the early colonial writings on Xhosa history and the West Indies slave history. Why was it essential to overlap these two historical events? You marry the historical fiction with the fantastical, how do you straddle these different genres?

ZW: The histories of the Cape and the West Indies are connected through British colonialism and economic exploitation; in other words, they overlap without my intervention. In *Still Life* it is the figure of Thomas Pringle that brings them together, primarily because his experience of slavery at the Cape and his writing about the effects of colonialism on native people secured him the position in London as Secretary of the Anti-Slavery society. Since I'm not interested in the genre of historical fiction, the fantastical was a way out of the restrictions of creating an illusion of the past. Instead, my resurrected characters inhabit the contemporary world; they are occupied with the actual writing of Pringle's history, and in the process reveal a different view of that past.

LS: Why Thomas Pringle? He was the editor of Mary Prince's The History of Mary Prince and supposedly knows that story, and why was it essential to bring in Hinsa Marossi?

ZW: Pringle, leader of the party of 1820 settlers and known as the Father of South African Poetry, interests me because he embodies the ambivalence of colonialism, and as such he is a contested figure in literary circles. Some researchers examine the ways in which he latterly revised his views about the colony, and trace his attempts at concealing earlier suprematist attitudes, so that his celebrated humanitarianism is questioned. I dramatise this through the character of Marossi, his adopted son who probes the poem in which he is represented as well as Pringle's letters to friends. Pringle indeed knew and published Prince's *History* and thus *Still Life* does not tell her story; instead, I explore the effects of that publication as well as Mary's feelings of gratitude towards him, in spite of the fact that her history was bowdlerised by the scribe.

LS: Still Life juggles with our perception of time and reality, and the introduction of Sir Nicholas Green offers an added texture to the exploration of colonial history and racial oppression. Is the rewriting of history a passion of yours? And why do our accounts need to be rewritten, not altered?

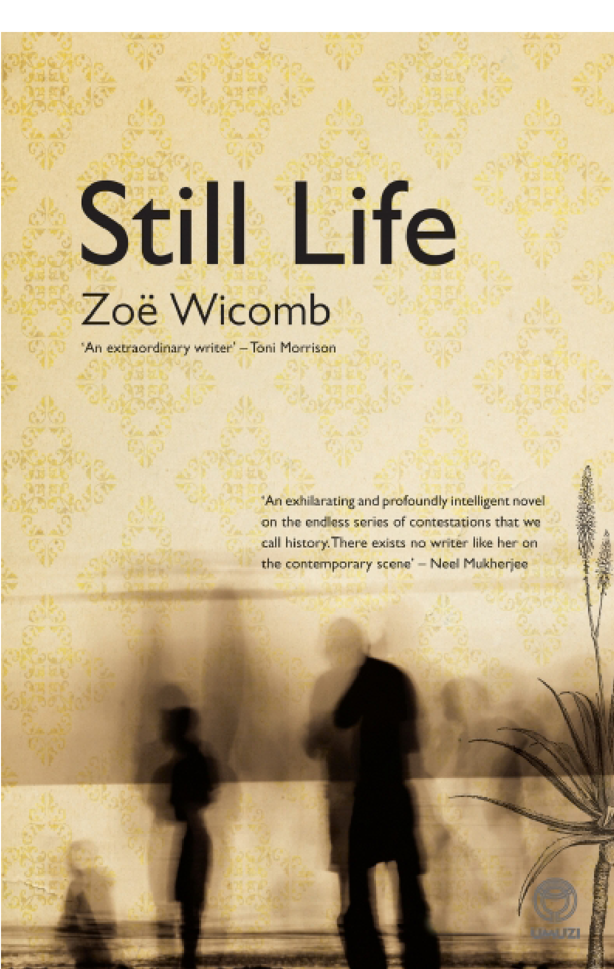
ZW: If by history you mean the past, then yes, it is history that drives my writing. In much of my work the past is uncovered so that characters can make sense of the present. Family histories too fall in that category, but I don't understand the distinction between 'rewritten' and 'altered'. Historical texts exist; they can't be undone. I see no no point in rewriting if you do not want to interrogate that past and offer a revised or alternative version, which is to say an altered view. So, you produce yet another text, one that offers yet another reading of the past.

Historiography alerts us to the various takes on history across time, a history of history, itself a valuable resource. My Nicholas Greene is a privileged Englishman who typically knows nothing of the British history of slavery and colonialism; or rather, he knows only the official sanitised version in which Britain has no role to play and slavery happens elsewhere.

As a character lifted out of literary history, imported into my story from an existing modernist novel, he represents yet another level of the real in fiction. Citations from his original existence in *Orlando* also comment on the casual racism found in literary history.

In my novel Greene brings a point of view that clashes with that of the others, but his daily interaction with them offers a further development in the theme of questioning cherished beliefs, and thus the possibility of redemption.

LS: The role of women in struggles for liberation is often undocumented. The position is often whitewashed, placed so far on the periphery as if these struggles happened outside of their daily lives. At the side of Mary Prince is Sir Nicholas Greene, a seasoned time traveller (and a character from Virginia Woolf's Orlando), was the rewriting of Mary Prince's history a repositioning, in a way, of her documented history?



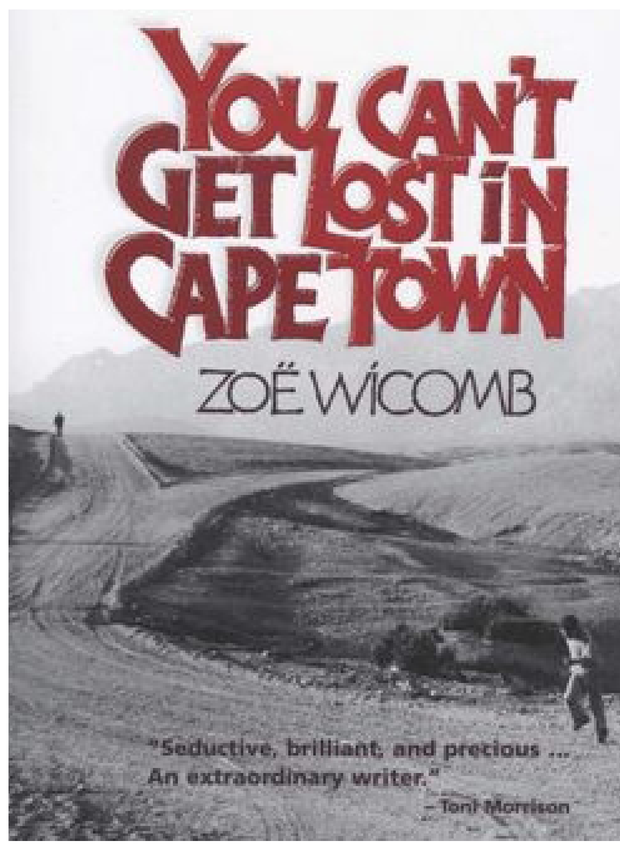
ZW: Mary Prince's history is not rewritten in my novel. Repositioned perhaps, in the sense that it is contextualised: it's mode of production as an oral account that was expunged of anything that the scribe found offensive, or that she thought would damage the anti-slavery cause in London, is made explicit. I also address the history of its reception. Mary's story was contested by slavers and their sympathisers and led to charges of libel against Pringle who published the book. In South Africa it fed into the popular satire against the humanitarian cause, especially against Ordinance 50 and the establishment of the Kat Rivier Settlement.

You have kept the bi-country anchor throughout your oeuvre. How has your journey as a writer been affected by this?

Yes, my writing is determined by being of two countries. As a South African who lives in Scotland and latterly spends only a couple of months a year in South Africa (or I should say in the Cape) it is inevitable that both countries feature in my work, since we write out of our own experience. Whilst Britain was a structured absence in my first work, the place has crept more and more into my fiction over the years. Perhaps fictions set in South Africa is a way of compensating for the fact that I live in Scotland.

South Africa is more than a country, a place for you. What does it mean, the land and home, to you now decades after migrating?

Difficult to know what that means. I remain in Scotland because I now have grandchildren here, but as a black foreigner in Europe, it is not possible to be entirely 'at home' here. On the other hand, when you've lived away from your home for so long, when your life as a South African has been largely a life of the mind, a reading, thinking, and writing about and out of the place, the very notion of home becomes problematic. It has been a slow, reluctant process, foolishly Cartesian, the letting go of a traditional idea of home in the physical sense whilst at the same time, ontologically, remaining South African.



I had a lengthy conversation with a friend who has read all your works, and she had the following questions:

Coloured identity and history have been one of the central themes in most of your oeuvre. How do you feel has this particular theme evolved over the past few decades (since the publication of your seminal essay on shame and coloured identity in 1998) both in your own thought process and perhaps in South African literature and culture at large since your first book, "You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town"?

Your writing frequently uncovers marginalised/untold parts of various aspects of history? I am thinking, for example, of Dulcie in your first novel, David's Story, who has often been read as partly based on Dulcie September. Dulcie September's story has until recently been largely neglected in mainstream media. How important is the work of uncovering marginalised histories/voices for your (fictional) writing especially and for literature that emerges out of the post colony more generally?

I am pleased that your friend has read my work and hope that I can answer her questions. It is difficult, and undesirable, to comment on one's own work, but I'll try.

It was not until reviewers pointed out that my first book of short stories was about coloured identity that I recognised it as such; in other words, I did not set out to write about identity. Rather, the difficult business of writing, of finding a form in which to explore the life of my young woman, was my conscious concern. The shame that I witnessed in members of my own family, especially in the older generation, their veneration of whiteness and effacement of blackness, was indeed something I wanted to write about in another genre, not least because I had not come across acknowledgement of such shame in any writing.

Of course, there have been cultural shifts since my essay on shame and coloured identity. Elsewhere I discuss attempts at the rehabilitation of whiteness, and there has also been a shift in some coloured circles to asserting indigeneity, an assertion that our ancestors were here at the Cape when the Europeans arrived, a response , no doubt, to African nationalism.

Coloured may be an irksome term, but to call ourselves Khoesan is surely the flip side of shame, since that position too refuses to acknowledge the fact that we are of mixed race. It effaces the genocide, the fact that those ancestors were exterminated by European diseases and colonial violence, that the language was lost, and that miscegenation undoubtedly occurred. Perhaps that is why I am drawn to the history of the Kat Rivier where Khoesan, Xhosa, slaves and Europeans mixed, and the use of 'coloured' came into being. So yes, my Shame essay is now obsolete, but exorbitance of identity remains an issue at the Cape.

In *David's Story*, the Dulcie narrative is bound up with this very history of coloureds, people who despised the term and so in the C19th adopted a 'pure', indigenous Griqua identity (much like the contemporary Khoesan movement). Again, the name Dulcie was not a conscious reference to Dulcie September, but I do recognise September as an inspiration and therefore the inevitable connection to my Dulcie.

I do not claim importance for my own work in the wider culture; I simply do what I'm driven to do, and people are free to read or not to read it. If in *Still Life* I resurrect the child Hinza who was dubiously acquired by Pringle, I also bring to life a barely mentioned character in one of his poems, Vytjie, whom Pringle claimed to be based on his actual servant. Perhaps such resurrection does exemplify a postcolonial urge to recover dignity for the subjugated.

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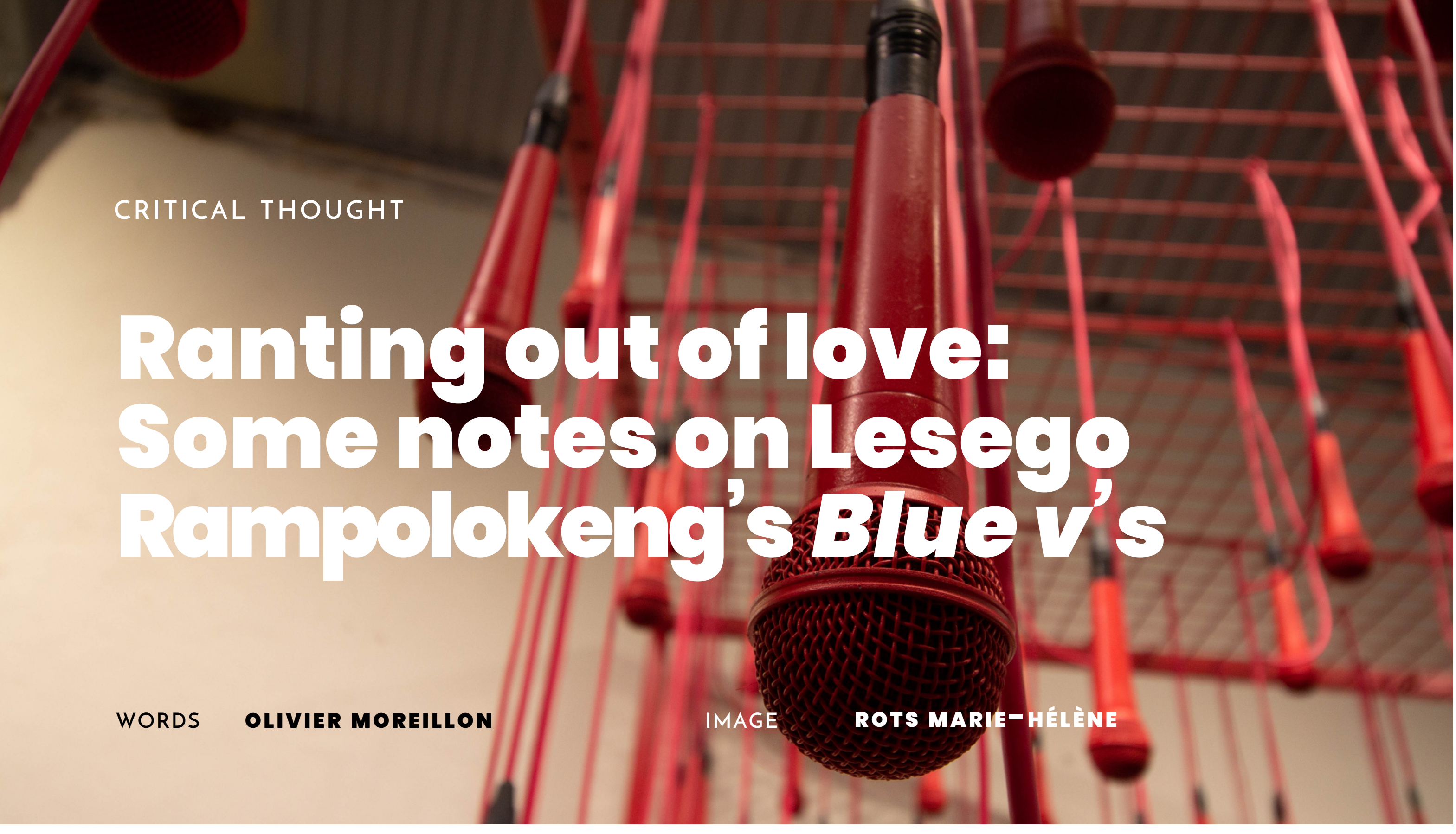
LORRAINE SITHOLE is a publisher at Red Soil Publishing and an influential figure in literary spaces in South Africa. She is passionate about African Stories and Has devoted the past 10-years to promoting African literature. She is a reading activist and a board member of African Book Trust and organiser of South African Book Fair.



CRITICAL THOUGHT

Ranting out of love: Some notes on Lesego Rampolokeng's *Blue v's*

WORDS **OLIVIER MOREILLON** IMAGE **ROTS MARIE-HÉLÈNE**

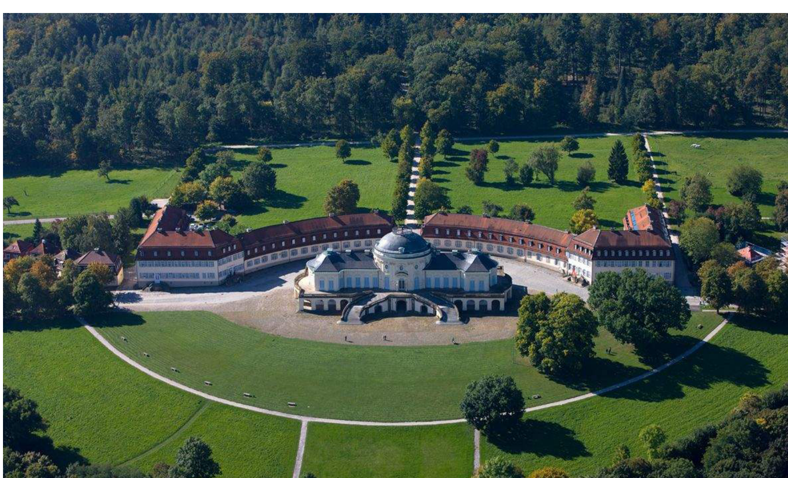
In an interview with Robert Berold in 1993, Lesego Rampolokeng states: "I've always thought that creative activity springs out of solitude [...]. And I must admit [...] I could only fully create or be able to put out words within me ONLY in solitude and ONLY if I was removed from everybody and anybody's vision" (Rampolokeng, 2003: 30; original emphasis).

It is this reference to the writer's need for solitude that struck me when first reading the interview. The importance Rampolokeng attributes to the aspect of solitude here may appear to be a mere comment on his process of writing at first.

On closer consideration, however, it seems to be of much greater importance to Rampolokeng's work, particularly if one considers his collection of poems *blue v's* (1998) and puts it in relation to his earlier work in *Horns for Hondo* (1990), *Talking Rain* (1993), and *End Beginnings* (1998). In fact, I would argue that aspects of solitude – and I mean the whole array of meanings the word can have, from loneliness, remoteness, isolation, and seclusion to confinement, sequestration, and separateness to name but the most prominent synonyms that come to mind – and the solitary subject are a golden thread in *blue v's* and maybe even Rampolokeng's writing career and oeuvre at large.

Blue v's (see p,29), Rampolokeng's fourth collection of poems, is little-known, which is partly due to the fact that it was published by Edition Solitude, a small German publisher, with German translations of Rampolokeng's poems by Thomas Brückner and an accompanying CD with readings of 21 of the 30 poems. Edition Solitude is an imprint of the Solitude Palace Academy in Stuttgart, Germany, an international and transdisciplinary artists' residence that has been supporting writers, artists, and scholars since 1990. Rampolokeng was the recipient of one of the academy's fellowships and was a resident at Solitude Palace from September 1997 to February 1998, a collaboration that resulted in the publication of *blue v's* in 1998. Almost half of the poems that first appeared in *blue v's* were subsequently included in *The Bavino Sermons* (1999), published by Gecko Poetry, which made these poems also (more) accessible to a South African readership.

Solitude Palace (see p, 23), situated in the south-western state of Baden-Württemberg, was Duke Carl Eugen of Württemberg's hunting lodge and summer residence. The palace, which was built between 1764 and 1768, is designed in the late Rococo and early Neoclassical style. The palace's luxurious centre piece principally served representative purposes while the Duke and his entourage occupied the south wing of the more modest annex. Situated on a vantage point on the western outskirts of Stuttgart, Solitude Palace offers magnificent views over Baden-Württemberg in the direction of Ludwigsburg north of Stuttgart. Today, the palace is one of Baden-Württemberg's touristic jewels and the palace's north annex hosts the Solitude Palace Academy.



There is a bitter-sweet irony to the fact that *blue v's* was to come into being at Solitude Palace. Designed as a so-called "Lustschloss" – *a maison de plaisance*, i.e. a house of pleasure (and one should probably add leisure) – the palace's names says it all. The solitude pursued there was one by choice: a retirement from public life in search of privacy, silence, piece and quite, but also as part of recreational activities that included hunting and illustrious gatherings. The splendour and magnificence that the palace's architecture radiate and its predominantly representational function, not to say it exhibitionism and boastfulness, stand in stark contrast not only to the solitude Rampolokeng is referring to in the opening quote to this article, but also to the subject matter in his writing in general and *blue v's* in particular.

Rampolokeng spent most of his early writing career travelling and working outside of South Africa. Asked about the degree of appreciation with regard to his work in South Africa, Rampolokeng, in another interview with Robert Berold in 1999, said: "I have to go to the extent of whoring, of prostituting myself elsewhere" (Rampolokeng and Muila, 2003: 140). The solitude Rampolokeng found himself in at Solitude Palace is thus not a chosen one and – given the gravity of his poetry's subject matter, a rigorous and unflattering critique of the '(post) apartheid conditions,' to borrow Derek Hook's term from his eponymous 2013 book (see my elaborations below) – not a solitude in pursuit of pleasure and leisure at all. According to Rampolokeng, the fact that he was better known outside of South Africa at the time than in his home country "it's also to do with *what* I've got to say" (42; original emphasis). It is no exaggeration to say that in the 1990s, South Africa was essentially not ready for Rampolokeng's work that is so critical of the rainbow nation. Suffice it to say that the 1990s were dominated by "the spectacle of the TRC" (Frenkel and McKenzie, 2010: 4), the international attention it attracted, and the overarching rainbow nation narrative of healing and redemption, not least with the intention of re-integrating South Africa into the arena of global politics and commerce. There have been direct counter narratives to the proceedings of the TRC. Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000), which is critical about including marginal(ised) histories but less obviously critical of the

status quo, is an example.

'Explosive' criticism of the post-apartheid government and post-apartheid politics, however, had no place in this narrative and thus neither did Rampolokeng's poetry which, as Khwezi Mkhize poignantly argues "invokes a counter-memory that unmasks the amnesia of the present" (2011: 198). An example of such 'explosive' criticism in *blue v's* is "9mm anthem for the killing of a politician." The poem is a fierce 'mind game' that, through "the microphone of [the lyrical I's] imagination" (24), assails the superficiality of, and corruption within, post-apartheid South African politics. According to the lyrical I's preface in Rampolokeng's performance of the poem on the accompanying CD, the state of affairs would warrant any crooked politician's death: "I wish i could say kill a politician a day and keep corruption away but i'm still responsible even if i'm the devil." The lyrical I, though, is aware of its role and consequences in response to its condemning stance: "i'm an intimate analyst / question catalyst & spin a line into the works wreck the / plans take mine & be damned" (24), i.e. ostracism and solitude as I will discuss in more detail further below. The fact that within South Africa's literary output (both fictional and non-fictional) criticism towards the ANC and post-apartheid government was voiced only much later, from the early to mid-2010s onwards – here Mongane Wally Serote's *Rumours* (2013), Niq Mhlongo's *Way Back Home* (2013), Mandla Langa's *The Texture of Shadows* (2014), and Jacob Dlamini's *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal* (2015) come to mind – puts Rampolokeng at the 'avant garde' of post-apartheid South Africa's decolonisation. After all, it was only with the #RhodesMustFall, the #FeesMustFall movements, and the student protests, which erupted around 2015, that South Africa's decolonisation became a fixture in the country's public discourse.

Having said this, I would like to emphasise that I am not suggesting a biographical reading of Rampolokeng's work. Any student of literature and/or literary critic knows better than to conflate the actual author and their implied counterpart. After all, 'the author is dead' and has been ever since Roland Barthes' famous postulation back in 1967. What I am interested in is the solitude of the lyrical I in *blue v's*, a solitude which, as I argue, Rampolokeng's poetry outlines as a constitutive condition of (post)apartheid subjectivity as becomes evident in the short poem "to the thought control tower," for example:

please
let me out
i'm trapped
inside
your heads

(blue v's 104)

There is a double perversion at play here. First of all, the confinement the lyrical I is facing is an imposed one. It is, however, a mental incarceration and not a physical one, one where other people's mindset and (continuing exclusionary) beliefs result in the lyrical I's detention by means of its outright rejection. It this mad or maddening 'othering' which is so 'torturous' for the lyrical I. This also becomes apparent in "dusk around my head," given in its entirety in what follows:

got spiders crawling around
my mind
listen to the options of
scorpions
in my sub-conscious
& i sit drink try
not to think
let alone see or hear
the night
creeping into my beer
but it treads around
in my head

(illumination. sights of light.
mental power cut.
castration.)

caught in visions of hysterics…
been hoping
for a sun & moon fusion
revolution
explosion
of pigmentation
but that makes up
(racial) romantics
& of the race casualty
generation
sitting amid noises
of obscenity's twilight
& a liberation of perversity
disease violence death
on silence's own feet
murderous intent flashing out
in flameblades
of my own darkness' eye

the glitter of my blackness
cuts up the light
descends
& strikes to the heart
of the night

but my cigarette
is left
unlit

(blue v's 72, 74; my emphasis)

The poem bespeaks the trajectory of the lyrical I's development from initial hope and a potential belief in the country's new dispensation ("been hoping / for a sun & moon fusion / revolution / explosion / of pigmentation) that had to make room for a more sombre reality in which the rainbow nation's non-racialist ideals have to be considered a failure ("but that makes up / (racial) romantics"). This loss amounts to nothing less than the lyrical I's "castration" as it is 'cut off' from the masses by refusing to join the 'hysteria' of the rainbow nation narrative and is thus left behind, in solitude, with its (seemingly) pessimistic perception and conception of the new South Africa.

The lyrical I's ensuing (mental) agony due to this rift is manifest from the outset. Tormented by dark – not to say poisonous – thoughts ("spiders crawling around" and "options of scorpions / in my sub-conscious"), the lyrical I is torn between its personal beliefs and the rainbow nation's euphoria (the "vision of hysterics"). This opposition is reflected in the repeated use of the vowel 'i' in the poem's first stanza. The diphthong /aɪ/ in "i," "try," and "night" is opposed to the short /ɪ/ in "sit," "drink," "think," "into," "it," and "in" and the long /iː/, and the acoustically very similar diphthong /ɪə/, in "see," "hear," and "beer." By means of this playful assonance, which is repeated in the poem's last eight lines, the (lyrical) "i" – reflected in the /aɪ/ sound – is outnumbered by the masses – the /ɪ/-, /iː/-, and /ɪə/-sounds – and faces a solitary existence instead.

In the poem's next two, bracketed lines, which function as a chorus of sorts, this opposition is further corroborated on a visual level as the lines are divided into opposing half lines, where the short /ɪ/ sound recurs in the first line. "Sights" and "light" in the second half of the first line then introduce a further acoustic element of the poem: the /t/ sound that leads towards the "mental power cut" in the first half of the following line. This repetition of the letter 't,' which is also reappears at the end of the poem, imitates a chopping sound of a knife, the "cut[ting]" in the act of "castration." Since the chorus does not contain any /aɪ/ sounds, it is clear that it is the lyrical I's castration that is at hand. After all, this part of the poem is further set apart from the rest by its inclusion in brackets which "cut[s]" the lyrical I from the "illumination" and the "sights of light" of the rainbow nation.

Interestingly, Rampolokeng only performs the poem's last eight lines on the CD that accompanies the book, omitting the rest, which amounts to a castration of sorts of his own poem. It is striking how Rampolokeng stresses the 't' in 'night,' 'cigarette,' 'left,' and 'unlit' in his performance, almost as if they were meant as a disapproving tut-tut, not only to towards the hysteria surrounding the rainbow nation, but also the hysterics' blindness to the limitations and faultiness of the rainbow nation narrative. At the same time, the tut-tut can also be seen as an act of defiance on the part of the lyrical I to feign indifference towards the ostracism it is facing.

The pain, however, runs deep as the lyrical I's castration consequently leaves it 'unhomed.' Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), prominently argues that the postcolonial subject is 'unhomed' as it is characterised by its cultural precariousness and displacement (9). In this condition, the postcolonial subject's personal history – often heavily marked by colonialism – and its existence within the larger postcolonial context become increasingly entangled (11). This certainly holds true for the lyrical I in *blue v's* since, as Garth Myers rightly reminds us, apartheid can be seen as a continuation of colonialism and, consequently, post-apartheid South Africa can be seen as the equivalent of the postcolonial age in other parts of the African continent (2011: 57).

From Achille Mbembe we furthermore know that the postcolony is characterised by a "banality of power" where "a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery […] constitute a distinctive regime of violence" (2001: 102). The violence Mbembe is referring to here is not necessarily of a physical nature. Rather, authority in the postcolony, according to Mbembe, is achieved by institutionalising a fetish: "an object that aspires to be made sacred; it demands power and seeks to maintain a close, intimate relationship with those who carry it […]. A fetish can also take the form of a talisman that one can call upon, honor, and dread" (111). Mbembe illustrates how such a fetish operates around the figure of the postcolonial autocrat, a fetish that is not restricted to the autocrat but includes the autocrat's entourage and the apparatus in place to maintain the constant propagation of the autocrat's fetishistic power. This propaganda machinery "turns the postcolonial autocrat into an object that feeds on applause, flattery, lies" and Mbembe reminds of the fact that "one should not underestimate the violence that can be set in motion to protect the vocabulary used to denote or speak of the *commandement*, and to safeguard the official fictions that underwrite the apparatus of domination, since these are essential to keeping the people under the *commandement*'s spell, within an enchanted forest of adulation" (111; original emphasis).

In the South African context, the TRC and the rainbow nation narrative can be seen as having been part of a (post)apartheid – and thus postcolonial – fetish. The ANC's armed struggle, for instance, was a 'taboo' during the TRC hearings. Several testimonies speaking to the abuse at Quatro – a training camp of the ANC's armed wing in Angola that was established in 1978 and later used as a detention centre notorious for its beatings and torture in order to obtain coerced confessions of alleged traitors of the anti-apartheid movement – were dismissed as beyond the scope of the hearings (see e.g. Cleveland 2005). It is the lyrical I's fundamental disagreement with this rainbow nation fetish that leaves it ostracised – or, as mentioned above, castrated and thus 'mutilated' – and condemned to a solitary existence.

"*Dusk around the head*" is by far not the only occurrence of violence in *blue v*'s. In fact, Mkhize has convincingly argued that Rampolokeng's poetry is replete with images of "the maimed body, the dismembered body, the body engaged in the excremental processes," a body "that is constituted out of acts of violence," which leads him to consider Rampolokeng's poetry as "a poetry of doubt and mourning" invested in "a poetics of disgust" that is able to "dissociate us from the familiar" and "challenges our standards of acceptance" (197, 186). While Mkhize is primarily invested in an analysis of the aesthetics at play in Rampolokeng's *Horns for Hondo* and *Talking Rain*, his argument can be extended to a more general contribution of Rampolokeng's work to the debate of the (post)apartheid conditions.

Firstly, and this is in line with, and a continuation of, Mkhize's argument, the violence in Rampolokeng's poetry can be seen as a reminder of the continuing importance of the apartheid history on South Africa's present. Based on Sigmund Freud, Derek Hook, whom I have mentioned above, calls the condition of the apartheid past's lasting infringement on the present 'apartheid belatedness' (185; original emphasis). According to Hook, South Africa's present is under a constant threat of the past, which renders the present a precarious one at best. This precariousness harbours both chances and risks. On the one hand, there is the chance of a temporal back and forth between past and present as the past can be re-visited and re-gauged. On the other, this possibility of re-evaluating the past bears the risk of its becoming a 'future past' (186-7).

In its ill-favoured form, such a future past might become manifest in the form of restorative nostalgia, i.e. a form of nostalgia that pursues a return to a lost home and the wish of its re-creation (Boym 2001: xviii, 41).

Rampolokeng's poetry can thus be said to be invested in a constant reminder of the continuing effect of the apartheid past on the present as a direct opposition to the fetishization of the rainbow nation narrative and a critique of South Africa's new dispensation, an undertaking that is painful as the (verbal and physical) violence in many of his poems show, a violence which hence becomes part and parcel of the lyrical I's (post)apartheid condition. If I put the 'post' in (post)apartheid in brackets, rather than hyphenating the word, I follow Hook both in order to highlight the effect of apartheid belatedness and to account for its importance in Rampolokeng's work.

Secondly, the violence in Rampolokeng's poetry has to be seen as a distinct means to convey the lyrical I's pain. Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, shows how "[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves it through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through resistance to language" (4). A person who is in pain has a very limited range of vocabulary to 'translate' their felt experience into words for others. According to Scarry, the verbalisation of pain is restricted to a limited number of adjectives – many of them related to the sensory experience of pain, which can be subdivided into a 'temporal' (e.g. a pulsing pain), a 'thermal' (e.g. a burning pain), and a 'constrictive' (e.g. a gnawing pain) component (7-8).

Due to the restrictedness of the repertoire of adjectives at hand, sufferers are soon forced to revert to 'as if-structures' that are, in turn, limited to two metaphors: "The first," Scarry posits, "specifies an external agent of the pain, a weapon that is pictured as producing the pain; and the second specifies the bodily damage that is pictured accompanying the pain" (15). An example of such an 'as if-structure' would be: 'It feels as if someone was repeatedly stabbing me with a knife.' On a side note, it is worth mentioning here that the word castration has been traced back to **castrum*, meaning 'knife, instrument that cuts,' which in turn is believed to stem from the Proto-Indo-European root **kes-*, meaning 'to cut.' The castration in "dusk around my head" thus becomes a distinct verbalisation of the lyrical I's pain that seems to say that its pain feels like a castration and hence follows the pattern of 'translating' pain in an 'as if-pattern.'

Scarry furthermore aptly stresses the aspect of disbelief that any expression/verbalisation of pain entails: "[T]o have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt," a deadlock that can but augment the pain of the sufferer (7). According to Scarry, the inexpressibility of pain also bears political ramifications as the more difficult it is to verbalise an experience or fact, the less visible it will be in political discourse.

Accordingly, "[i]f, for example, it were easier to express intellectual aspiration than bodily hunger, one would expect to find that the problem of education had a greater degree of social recognition than the problem of malnutrition or famine" (12).

The lyrical I's apparent difficulty in expressing its pain, which can be said to have arisen from an intellectual un-ease with the rainbow nation romantics, thus stands in direct opposition to the rainbow nation fetish and its propaganda machinery that will do anything in its (fetishised) power to keep the illusion afloat by drowning the lyrical I's concerns and critique. Considering the lyrical I's impasse, its disillusion does not come as a surprise. In the opening lines of "the cry of disillusion" it says, for example:

boil-fortresses burst
wall to wall notions crumble
a miscarriage
where a larval flow of
possibility
degenerates into dead-end
putrescence

(blue v's 88)

The scene pictured here is anything but appealing, what with the images of erupting pus, crawling larvae, and the rottenness that are used to describe the status quo of (post) apartheid South Africa. This grim picture is followed by a number of cries that reflect the lyrical I's immobilisation both in thought and movement. These cries are triggered by the mention of "dachau dresden nagasaki," three

cities whose history is inextricably linked to World War II and its gruesome crimes against humanity. Unsurprisingly, the poem then ends in the chilling warning that:

> *this land's balanced on a bubble*
> *one prick & we're fucked*
> *obsolete/extinct*
>
> (*blue v's 90*)

What is expressed here is thus a deep-rooted existential angst that is put in line with the extermination of thousands of people at the concentration camp in Dachau, the bombing of Dresden and the subsequent widespread devastation, and the dropping of an atomic bomb in Nagasaki. The threat that the lyrical I expresses is a verbalisation of its pain through the equation of its existential angst to the violence and (total) destruction during World War II, which indeed leaves the reader/listener with a sombre atmosphere.

'Feeling blue,' the lyrical I, in comparison to the "call to, or for, the struggle" in *Horns for Hondo*, *Talking Rain*, and *End Beginnings* (Mkhize 184), seems to have 'sobered up.' Accordingly, the tone in *blue v's* seems even harsher, the critique more radical. Here the first two stanzas of "blue v's," the collection's title poem:

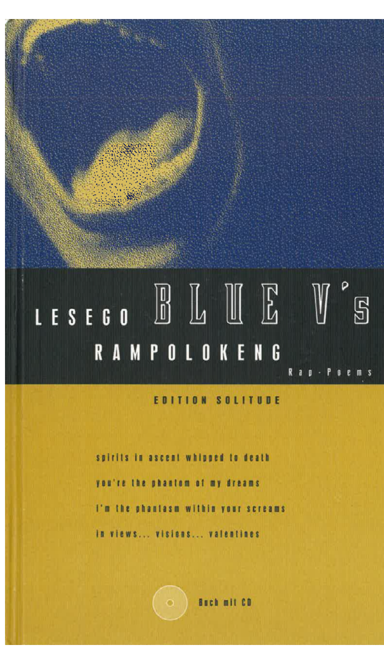
> *for the nightmare they said dig*
> *to the root of the deepest fear*
> *it's there … lurking*
> *but 1 … 2 i count up nothing*
> *poignant in anchors rusting*
> *3 … 4 there's nothing*
> *profound in hearts breaking*
> *spirits in ascent whipping to*
> *death you're the phantom of my*
> *dreams i'm the*
> *phantasm in your screams*
> *in views … visions … valentines*
> *vampires in my blood wolves at*
> *my feet on my skull sit*
> *vultures but in my heart*
> *your call of the wild in my mind*
> *… i take them on one*
> *by ten multiplied by a*
> *coward & smoke signals the way*
> *forward*
> *'cos the love you speak*
> *touches blue at the heard of*
> *my fire of life*
> *in views … visions … valentines […]*
>
> (*blue v's 106*)

What is interesting about "blue v's" is its stream of consciousness character; the imagery in is no less disheartening than in the previous example. As the poem progresses, the frequency of enjambments, ie. the carrying of a thought over into the next line, increases, as if the urgency of the lyrical I's words was rising with each line, as if its thoughts were increasingly erupting and could no longer be contained (with)in a single line. This irregularity seems to be further corroborated by the frequent use of ellipses that give the impression of a pause that the lyrical I needs before being able to continue its thought. Together these elements bespeak the emotional distress and 'blue mood' the lyrical I seems to be in.

In closing, there remains one unanswered question: that as to whether all is lost in view of the lyrical I's exceedingly pessimistic view. Mkhize, even though in passing, mentions aspects of melancholia in relation to *Horns for Hondo* (194). Melancholia, however, has to be seen in relation to mourning. The two conditions, according to Sigmund Freud, share a number of characteristics. Both emotions are, for example, characterised by a general negative perception of, and disinterest in, the world.

Melancholia, however, "is […] related to an unconscious loss of a love-object, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing unconscious about the loss" (245). The mourner is furthermore able to renounce the lost love-object while the melancholic clings to it. The latter's inability leads to "a pathological disposition" that results in "a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (243, 244). I would argue that Rampolokeng's poetry in general – certainly his poetry of the 1990 – and his poetry *blue v's* in particular are not melancholic. There clearly is a "loss of a love-object" at hand, i.e. the loss of the lyrical I's home-country to a 'whitewashed' rhetoric within the political discourse of the new South African and the lyrical I's imminent solitude it faces for its critique of the system, but I do not think that the loss in question is an "unconscious" one.

On the contrary, the lyrical I's break with the state of the South African nation is a conscious one. The lyrical I's anger is most certainly a fierce one. The recurring violence and the at times disturbing imagery, which has to be seen as a means to express the lyrical I's 'unspeakable' pain about the status quo as argued above, confirm this. However, the lyrical I's "rap-ranting" (96-103) is one "coming out of love" (112-118). For me, *blue v's*, and Rampolokeng's poetry of the 1990 at large, thus manifests a mourning lyrical I much more than a melancholic one. However, considering that the lyrical I in *blue v's* (and Rampolokeng's poetry of the 1990s) does not manifest a general lack of interest in the world around it – quite the opposite – begs the question as to the limits of Freud's conception of mourning and melancholia, such as they have been dealt with in the decolonisation of trauma studies (see e.g. Andermahr (ed.) 2016). Freud does have a rather (psycho) pathological approach and a (psycho)pathological 'anamnesis' of the lyrical I is certainly not my aim and would be beside the point. The limitations of Freud's approach, however, open avenues for the discussion of Rampolokeng's poetry of the 1990s and/or his oeuvre at large using other approaches to mourning, melancholia, and trauma such as advocated by David Eng and Shinhee Han (2003) or Irene Visser (2011) and used by Danyela Demir (forthcoming) in her reading of *Bird-Monk Seding* (2017).



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Chasing Words

DIMAKATSO SEDITE

'It begins with a sound of a hondo,
of a rap master,
end beginnings,
head on fire,
a half-century thing'

Lesego Rampolokeng

A box skirts a rondavel's trance
trying to rid itself of corners
poking it beyond existence
It has a hint of a hondo
a poem in chains tumbling –

its drenched jersey shaking rain
into eyes scratching dry in magic
Words trapped in marrow
have fled a trouser's fabric –
leaving us hunched in places

that swear we've slipped
from ourselves Un-cusped,
crease on a dress cascades
in flames to the orgasm of a song –
its frock fraying shattering

into the heart of her crush
We're biscuits crumbling
spiralling down the stairs

that surge through the skin
of a curtain smoking up
in wool that's shocked
it's cold and ice and sinking
into a glass of double martini.
We're what's unfrozen the air,
eyes clammed close and useless

as we flee ourselves like words
escaping from a newspaper
It might have been Hondo, that man
who looks like men who look like me

When our minds finally flee our madness
to uncusp in the blue of denim pockets,
our foreheads will flicker one. last. time,
we'll tell heaven's gates we lived to chase
words, and managed to catch a few.

DIMAKATSO SEDITE was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Her poetry has appeared in Teesta Review, Brittle Paper, New Coin, Kalahari Review, Best New African Poets, Botsotso, Aerodrome, Brave Voices, Poefrika, Poetry Potion, Hello Poetry, and Poetry Cafe. Her debut poetry collection will be published by Deep South in 2021.

Post-freedom dreams and nightmares: A review of Lesego Rampolokeng's *Bantu Ghost*

WORDS **MPHUTLANE WA BOFELO** IMAGE **SHIFTY MEDIA CHANNEL**

Let me start by declaring a conflict of interests: I am an avid lover of the works of Lesego Rampolokeng and have an intimate association with him based on our common commitment to taking poetry out of the elitist enclave of 'high-art' to make it speak to the concrete issues affecting individuals, communities and the world we live in.

'*Bantu Ghost: A stream of (black) unconsciousness*' is vintage Lesego Rampolokeng, recreating language, overturning idioms/concepts/terms, giving birth to new words and developing new proverbs to deal with 'new' realities. In Bantu Ghost, Rampolokeng captures the contrast between the bling-bling, opulence and crass consumerism of urban suburbia and the squalor, wretchedness and hopelessness of township life. He uses the device of 'uncouth'/'vulgar' language and the imagery of filth/dirt and gore: Excrement, vomit, etc – to highlight ravages of the new world order on the social psyche, as well as the rampant corruption and moral decadence from the top echelon to the bottom-rung of society. Like Aimé Césaire in *Return to the Native Land*, Lesego Rampolokeng shuns romantic portrayal of his motherland's past and present (and future). He uses graphically surreal images – and definitely not politically correct lingo – to interrogate post-freedom dreams and nightmares, slogans, rhetorics and realities.

It is succinctly clear that Rampolokeng adds a spice and puts a spin and twist to words and concepts, not as an exercise in word-play, but as a 'subversive' act of questioning the slogans and rhetoric of the new dispensation. His is a critical, sceptical engagement with official, dominant discourse and established literary and political canon. The New World Order is rendered as the New World Hoarder, IMF and World Bank are respectively referred to as Iron Mother Fucker and World Shank, the middle-class becomes the diddle-class,

and renaissance is 'transliterated' as 'rear naai sense.' Even the sub-culture/ counter-culture/ underground fraternity does not escape the redefining pen of Rampolokeng. 'More fire' - the mantra of poetry sessions, and hip hop and dance-hall circles becomes 'whore fire', and the word-play shadow fights of battle-rappers comes under spotlight:

> *'battle-cats on sulphur-trips / word-cut the cipher drips/ strychnine rhyme-busted lips / hips twisted off the break / beat on the outskirt ...shit and bleed. '*

Bantu Ghost: A stream of (black) unconsciousness is a poetic treatise on the psycho-physical condition/ state of the masses and the new political and economic elite in post/neo- apartheid South Africa. It started as a tribute to Steve Biko but ended as homage to black thinkers who have made a contribution to theorisation on the Black Experience. In the prelude and chapter four – entitled '*The Black Word*' – Rampolokeng particularly celebrates and presents the voice of mostly writers and thinkers who have contributed on the discourse on the politics and economics of identity and the psychology of the rulers and the ruled in a both a colonial/settler-colonial as well as post-colonial/neo-colonial setting. In many ways *Bantu Ghost: A stream of (black) unconsciousness* is a continuation of the project initiated by writers like Fanon, Césaire and Biko: The theorisation on the conditions and forces that puts black under-classes at the receiving end of the politics and economics of race and class. Like most of the characters and personas in the novels, plays and poems of Rampolokeng, the protagonist of *Bantu Ghost* is an archetype through which the writer/poet/actor/ narrator takes us through his study of the pathology and psychology of people who have been victims of various forms of denigration, degradation, de-humanisation, and de-personalisation

Through the mind/voice/eyes of Bantu Ghost – an institutionalised demented abstract or a saintly prisoner of experiment for the Pavlovs of power possessed by Biko's spirit, Lesego Rampolokeng interrogates the exteriorities of South Africa to delve into the interior – the psyche, consciousness and sense of identity of the new political and economic elite, the literary, academic and public intellectuals and the general masses. From *Bantu Ghost's* perspective, the much celebrated peaceful change in South Africa was the result of no miracle but a forced choice of reform above revolution:

> *'We promised Mabrak-time / a black lightening strike / but then we got struggle fatigue.'*

The book is divided into six chapters with self-reflective titles, and ends with notes of which titles are also allude to their thematic contents. Aptly titled 'The Cell', chapter one portrays the mental cage and psychological prison, identity crisis, state of anaesthesia and false consciousness that 'flag freedom', manufactured consent and romanticised narration of history and mediocre representation of history and social reality puts the people into.

The internet, television, radio, exhibitionist and conformist literature and arts are presented as the new instruments of self-alienation and self-ostracisation that help to keep truth and conscience in manacles:

> *'Torture instruments have changed / brains caught in the internet / they incubate the minds in the television / they radio-fry vision'.*

The Tower of Babel, chapter two, raves against the hijacking of the language and songs of liberation to promote sexist, homophobic and ethnic prejudice, and the cooption of intellectuals and activists by corporate capital and the political establishment. It takes a critical look at the hypocritical double standards and forked-tongue of the world in dealing with race politics and human rights issues:

> *'Life is gauged on broken scales / the weight of humanities in unequal / like stomp the kaffirs / but just do not touch the jews / history will not allow it...'*

This is clear allusion to the great powers affinities towards Zionist Israel and their amnesia with regard to the holocaust of slavery and colonialism suffered by black people, reflected in among others, the concerted efforts towards removing Zionism and slavery from the agenda of the world conference on racism, xenophobia and related forms of discrimination. The poet is scathing in his critique of this conference:

> *'in the Sandton sun / a race conference / they are plumbing identity / behind Anal-eyes...'*

Bantu Ghost is equally harsh in revealing South Africa's tendency to skirt around the problem of racism and present a false picture of racial bliss at the expense of obfuscating the reality at the ground. He laments the loss of an opportune moment for a transformed anti-racist humane society in South Africa:

> *'humanity's greatest most silent crime / the alienation of emancipation / non-race gone obsolete at birth / redundant concept at conception/ we celebrate a still-birth'.*

In chapter three, aptly titled 'Chaining the minds', Bantu Ghost castigates the mediocrity of the cult of consumerism, the celebrity culture, and the false securities and paranoid insecurities of the new black middle class. Chapter five is a critique of '*The New World Hoarder*', with its obscurantist flight into fantasy, its massacre of intellect and its sale of spin rather than truth to the masses. The co-option of intellectual and activist voices in the big conferences organised by officialdom is exposed:

> *'Another conference / they call for toilet papers / all to present their faeces / what is your deception / are you content to lick arse / they say it nourishes'.*

Chapter six, 'The search for consciousness', is a damning critique of liberal democracy, with its proclivity to give a real voice only to the rich and propertied. *Bantu Ghost* could be talking about the systematic exclusion of other political voices through devices such as the ZAR1.5 million required for a party to register to contest in South Africa's general national elections:

> *'they cram democracy in a can / & put it in a shelf / they can buy who afford'.*

The whole chapter constitutes a critic of the regimes and regiments of global capitalism and neo-liberalism such as Bretton Woods institutions, and also exposes the ravages of neo-liberal macroeconomics of South Africa on the poor. For instance, it makes an allusion to the ruthless eviction of the poor:

> *'Lefifi Tladi said we are the elephant/ but some are the red ant'.*

There is also a criticism of acquiescent 'poster poets' and the erasure of memory. The six chapters are followed by the *Notes: Mountain Sermon, Black Art of the Perry Normal, Notes for TOU (The Original Ungovernables)* and *Notes from the Smoke*.

I will only talk about my favourite notes in the book: *Notes for TOU (The Original Ungovernables)*. The note is in the loving memory of the unnamed, unknown, boys and girls who walked into the lion's den to make Apartheid South Africa ungovernable to free Mandela to liberate South Africa to build a new South Africa to see the dawn of the government of the people... the young lions who never returned from exile, the combatants who disappeared (not) mysteriously, the former guerillas who were not fortunate enough to make it to parliament or to know someone who knows someone who has they key to getting tenders. Like Edward Said speaking truth to power, the poet-persona in *Notes for TOU* scratches beneath the veneer of political correctness to interrogate the neo-apartheid dispensation with tough questions and frank testimonies of the harsh realities on the ground.

Because the heads of states usually provide us with the state of their heads rather than that of the nation, the poet takes it upon himself to do a thorough stock-taking of the condition of the nation. Since writers, poets and singers are supposed to be windows to the soul of the nation as well as watchdogs of society at the ground – or, so to speak, the ears, eyes, and noses of the common people – the poet dares to question the state of the word, written/ spoken/recited/

sung/mumbled. This is no easy task as the culprits of turning the word into commodity on the dough/dung exchange market are colleagues, including trusted/celebrated god-fathers turned entertainers, stripping pro bono for par-lie-mantrarians – bored men and women in grey suits and outdated hairstyles. It truly must hurt to witness the massacre and death of the word at the hands/mouths of people who include pioneer word-combatants of the freedom struggle:

'in the beginning was the dread-word / & that's where it all ended. dead./ the holy recorder spun & cadavers fell out. / blood-oily how the vocoder sound the deathbout'.

Even soothing melodies and healer-sounds such as the symphonies of Zim Ngqawana and Wilhelm Richard Wagner's synthesis of the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts can be appropriated by the ideologue and aparatnik to be opium that turns people's heads into vegetables by sucking out their memory and keeping them too busy grooving and merry/baby-making to notice the preservation of white privilege by clauses aimed at ensuring that the sun never sets on white bureaucrats and technocrats. And leaving the people too sound-drunk and drama-befogged to see the spear of the nation being turned into ammunition for the racketeering political elite whose reward for corruption is handsome golden-handshakes:

'Now the sun sets on THE clause / populace abide by c / laws of the land are arse-wipes/ gangs in government-approved stars & stripes rackets wrapped around tax brackets painted 'immune' in blood / no arrest warrant but a cold-blood-age pension car d/ license to steal permit to get loose the perversion flood / from 'mkhonto sharpened to intshumentshu is a national hemorrhage / the bleed is internal this liberation age'.

It is not so much the political cover-ups and collusion between the police and crime syndicates that is shocking, but the ululation/cheering of veteran wordsmiths turned groupies of the establishment that is mind-shattering and arse-choking:

'police farce so crime syndicated ultra-sophisticated / it moneyed / tendered lethal plastic economic explosive with) ghost-in-the-latrine-bred intentions) / Don Dada top of the political machine ladder / makes capital bank-rob/rupt semantics

The poet raises our consciousness about the conscious decision of the establishment to demonise counter-culture voices that challenge the commodification of art as well as the cult of consumerism:

'anti-consumerism rap they establishment yap it crap-talk lyric / theory it psycho-conspiracy chaotic-verbal dummy-bulleted anarchic dung'.

He also makes us aware of the carrot and stick manoeuvres of the establishment. This takes the form of offering cash and massive coverage and ample performance podium to apolitical, hip-swaying, clapping poets/singers/rappers who transport people away from social reality with happy-verses / anaesthetic lyrics, and labelling conscious art as primitive and out of the times. This works as a co-optive measure, as those who crave for His Masters' endorsement stamp and crumbs from big capital dada join the 'talk-a lot-and-say-nothing' crowd:

'got my thoughts stapled to my tongue / so all I drop is bung / crease&shined/ muff-buffed/ trance-verse-tightened up / pre-apartheid-historic / caught between kgositsile's gravedigger precision text / & celan's concentration camp black milk /I house them cemetery-dead-gold-heaven stratospheric'.

Notes for TOU depicts the reality of neo-colonialism, as it exposes how the new elite continues the legacy of the old colonial elite (as Fanon predicted), by creating wealth out of the blood/sweat and death/misery of poor men daily swallowed by the hungry death. This is aptly captured by allusion to former mine-workers turned into mine-owners or former foremen at the mines becoming chairmen of the directorate boards of the same mining companies that turn workers into cogs-in-a-machine, our parents into boys and our men into the devil/god-knows-what. The poet shows us how even the taste and eating habits of our new middle and comprador bourgeois class change with their newly acquired status:

'How they get down, the diddle-class…better raw boerewors copulation with spanspek'.

But the poet has a stubborn hope and a remembering mind that is tuned to the most seasoned verses and lyrics from sons and daughters of the land who keep it real enough to hear the telegraphed message of the blue sky, to affirm Africa's sons' belonging to the sun, and expose the prostitution of the word:

'pimp-poetry became fashion, style & flash, dracula-dressed up in drag pattern u swung roots radics-style'.

Notes for TOU is a verbal/frontal attack on the abortion of a better life for all and/or the miscarriage of 'the people shall govern' false consciousness, respectable petty bourgeosie lies, and kitsch illusions sold to the masses as reality. The poet raises his voice above the noise of the truth-slaying mess media and the tell-lie-vision, to caution against phantom roars of young lions living in the shadows of big daddy former guerrilla now gorilla munching from instead of feeding the masses:

'voices from the palace & noises in the sewers / is spitters & swallowers difference- / whether all fours or prostration the crack's always in between / now youth league/organisation/ congress is hog-dick-&-run / to hide inside father-cock's panties'.

The sharp eyes/words of the poet are spot on with regard to the old trick of media-created radicals who spit cold-fire to take the attention of the masses away from real alternative voices. The poet is not fooled by empty pronouncements on freedom of speech, while in reality there is no travel-space for non-parrot artists and dissident voices, and the public broadcaster offer us little live debates and public forums but a lot of 'parliament live'– a dead show of 'wrinkled arse-shuffle on the bench afro-chic petty & boozed up on hysteria's versions of history's perfumed stench'.

Notes for Tou is a lethal attack on poetry/music for the sake of arse-shaking and ranting only for the sake of paying rent or fitting the bill. It is the assertive voice of a dissident poet refusing to flow with the time or to let his individuated voice be swallowed in the vast cesspool of kitsch culture and fashion trends. Here poetry is not a passport and visa from concrete reality but a means of 'rememorying' the place that the poet calls home and the times and spaces that characterise it without any selective memory or schizophrenic romanticising.

The notes make us ware that we are trapped in the same old story of taking power in the name of the people but never giving it to the people… the same old tale of two cities:

'The leadership carries cannibal cargo… / fakes a people's power cumming & spurts Soweto-Mouth way./ No receipts for the royal seminal-flushing /

nothing for the receiver/ deceiver/achiever of revenue / Joburg moves its jaws, Soweto's stomach rumbles.'

The same old story of jet-setting, globe-trotting leaders and denialism with regard to critical issues afflicting the country and the world:

'Mista Leader proclaims in foreign cities: / nothing to heal zero to mend there is no crisis / as he strokes his beard the body of labour suffers a stroke.'

Bantu Ghost takes us into the idyllic, paradise that is suburbia, and then into the dusty god-forsaken streets, into the lives of ordinary men and women, boys and girls trying to eke a living and make sense out of the misery, into the world of the subaltern people on the fringe of the market economy – euphemistically called the second economy;

and into the underworld and/or underbelly of society, into the world of vampire insurance schemes, and into the utopian/ escapist world of religion and idealism: 'in blithe & tithe visitations we guzzle Jesus chalice profanity / In religious drunkenness attempt to puzzle out the lice from the fleas…/ as the bloody waters continue to rise, life's little prices / it's all venereal soaking thru my notes.'

Reading Bantu Ghost – a stream of (black) unconsciousness, one could not help but come to the conclusion that Lesego Rampolokeng is to literature and theatre what Fanon and Biko are to sociopolitical analysis and activism.

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Watching cars

BY NOMTHA NDYOKO

there wasn't much to do in the new millennia
decolonizing funerals
and weddings
and home schooling children
and new moons
the simple treasure

watching cars
wondering where everyone was rushing to
despite the stop signs
and the speed humps some us yielded to

changing the currency
the sharpness in our eyes
after seeing past and future
documented by trees

the wind haunts the air
the smell of the ocean
is in far reach

NOMTHA NDYOKO who is also known as Umtha Namanyange is a mother, writer, singer/songwriter and arts activist from Mdantsane in the Eastern Cape. She obtained a Master of Arts in Creative Writing from Rhodes University. She is part of multimedium collective, UHAMBO. Some of her poems have appeared in the New Coin, Thyini, and South of Samora. Her poem, "the edge" has won the 3rd prize in the 2018 DALRO Poetry Award. Her interest in musical archives and maps has led to a collaboration titled Batyunjiwe with Makhulu Madosini, a series geared toward facilitating intergenerational conversations between musicians of the old and the new.

Word for Ramps

For Lesego Rampolokeng

BY ICEBOUND MAKHELE

Deep beneath
Revolutions are staged
Tears fall
And blood spills
Eardrums burst
And ghosts appear

In re-lived reincarnations
Mysteries are revealed
Lies and lice re-peeled
Histories repeat
Or receive the new beginnings
At the end or at the hondo-tip
The verge of the verse's pulse
Inhabits cracked skulls
And merges past sorrows
With the beauties of word-pass
Bless the unborn free the enslaved
Word

Break free from the world
And submerge in the word

Whilst lips tremble
fools fumble and the wise
mumble
Stay humble
Whilst the governors stumble
Remain ungovernable
Save no ink
Spare no breath

Word

Echo-spread your voice
Above and below
To the left, to the right
And to the centre
For the plight of the down-trodden
For the wise to re-emerge
Rule again

Word
Is neither the author nor the narrator
But
The Uni (verse) through her messengers

The walker

BY KOBUS MOOLMAN

The Walker

A man walks down a road. Any road. Any man. In a big city. On a dry and hot windy day. Fires to the north. Fires to the south. And black ash floating down. The smell of burning.

A man walks down a road.
And he notices.

A woman on one leg taking a small stone out of her high-heeled shoe. A woman under a striped beach umbrella selling air-time for mobile phones. A young girl wearing a pair of diving goggles and riding a rusted tricycle.

A man continues walking down a road. A greasy drizzle coming down now. A cold wind. And he notices.

A man with outsized shoes and a plastic packet for a hat on his head. A man pushing a supermarket trolley piled high with scrap-metal. A young boy with a speech bubble coming out of his mouth and six black dots inside the bubble.

A man walks down a road. Blankets opening out all across the sky. Then wind and wind again pulling and pulling. And he notices.

A piece of faded newspaper in a gutter. An advert for a car alarm on one side. And the funeral notice for a man with the same initials as his own on the other. And he bends down. And he picks up the side of the newspaper with the advert and he leaves the other side behind. And he crumples the piece of newspaper and puts it into his mouth.

A man proceeds down a road. Steam rising up from the cracked tar all around him. The smell of engine oil. The smell of diesel fumes. The smell of bitumen.

A man walks down a road. And he notices.

Two dogs fighting through a wire fence. Two crows squabbling over a dead dog in a gutter. A blind man with a blind dog on a leash.

A man walks down a road. A man continues walking. A man with a stone in his foot. With one side of a piece of newspaper in his mouth. Dragging a dead dog on a leash.

Post-mortem

BY KOBUS MOOLMAN

Muddy clumps of organs.
Black dried blood. With flies.
The thick neck of an hyena
pulls at old sinew.
And I wonder
whose stretched white importance is this?
Whose rope? Whose belt?
Whose elastic to hold together
all of their hope?

KOBUS MOOLMAN is head of Creative Writing at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. He has published seven collections of poetry and two plays, and has edited a collection of poetry, prose and art by South African writers living with disabilities. He has won numerous local and international awards for his work. His first collection of short fiction, The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories, was published in 2017. His latest collection of poetry, The Mountain behind the House (Dryad Press), was published in 2020.

Contemporary sonics

BY XITHA MAKGETA

I've been drinking Mzwandile's drawings
shades and lines eating my bowels to decay
Loose anus can't hold my shit

I compose poems with faeces
My abstract heart
A blank placard hangs its art on the wall
And in the background malombo drum a stampede
Trace it to the riot-rhythm rebel beat that birthed us

Nduduzo's fingers are land mines exploding on a piano
spirits speak through finger tips
we transit in songs that travelled.

For Beirut, my noose

WORDS DIMA CHIMA **IMAGE** @DARAJMEDIAENGLISH

"We spend the first part of our lives demanding air in our homelands, and then we leave to countries where we are promised air, only to find out we were robbed of lungs"-

Hamed Sinno, June 16

Edward Said famously wrote that exile is "the unsealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted."[1] But who ever considers themselves as being native to one land, who ever thinks of themselves as being exiled, unbelonged?

On August 4th 2020, at 6:08 Pm, local time, time stopped. Or at least, it was local to me, despite it being 4:08Pm, in London, where I was. An almost nuclear blast tore through Beirut, levelling half the city, killing 204, injuring at least 6500, and displacing 300,000. Tragedy on this scale reaffirmed my uncomfortable, unbearable distance from home. But it simultaneously speared me to the core, to my Lebanese core. I was so far away, utterly helpless, but I also felt paralysed, right there, in the heart of the city. It felt like I was being flung through the air by the massive blast of the explosion, even though somehow, I was on the balcony of the flat in calm and leafy London, except I was ridiculously immobile, with numb legs and a total loss of the feel of my body.

We were under attack; we were being bombed. I knew it, I knew this was what was happening, and I knew that my sister, my family and friends would all die. In the split second between shock and confusion, muscle memory kicked in. You know the drill: you ask your friends and family if they are alive, if they are still there. Relief (?). Afterwards, you ask, how alive? This urgent need for details is rooted in an equal urgent need to ground yourself, physically, emotionally. Where am I/Us? How am I/Us? How are We? Because even if we exist in two times at the same time, disjointedly, we are still irrevocably joined. And exile is never more pronounced than in those moments when despite the danger and everything else, you yearn for home, for that connection that enjoins you, that seals the rift. When physically, you have already left, but emotionally you realise you never can. And it is in this forced rift, a sea of struggle for ground, that I must finally consider my exile, accept its finality, its perpetuity.

All writing about Beirut starts in an eerily similar way. This disjointed existence is apparently a marked condition of being Lebanese. In a tweet from July 2nd, Nasri Atallah expressed a feeling of finality about Beirut, like this is "the end of something." He described the concept of "anticipatory grief" to explain this feeling: "it's the grief that comes *before* a death. In the anticipation of it. Fear, anxiety, guilt, anger, tearfulness, inability to sleep. So many Lebanese people are going through all of these symptoms right now." Writing on the back of the October17 Thawra (revolution), an economic collapse, its consequential impeding famine and hyperinflation, and the devastating effects of the COVID-19pandemic — all of which precipitated the August4 Explosion— there is a cruel irony in just how spot on Atallah was in his anticipatory grief, in how final it all really would be.

In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, there was a familiarity to the fear, to the confusion, the dread. Muscle memory. Was it the June war with Israel in 2006? The string of assassinations from 2005-2008? The occupation of the South by Israel, until liberation in 2000? Or even further back, the legacy and memories of Civil War of 1975-1990 passed down to us by our parents? In a country with no memorials to its victims, no monuments to the events which shaped it, and no accountability for those who perpetrate these crimes, we fall prey to a cyclical, predatory necropolitics which relies on our forgetfulness. This is why the warlords who plunged the country into civil war still sit in parliament today, why they steal and murder with impunity and still demand our deference. But no, this was different. This was final. This was the realisation that a bomb made of 2750 tons of ammonium nitrate was left in the heart of the city, neglected, intentionally unattended for 7 years, by the 'political elite' who hold us hostage still. This was the realisation that our perceived interim safety in between all the incidents of the past was never real, that all this time we lived, we laughed, we loved, and we slept, we were doing it right next to ticking nuclear bomb. This was final because the myth of the nation finally exploded in that bomb – the myth that there was a place for us, that there would always be a viable place for us, vanished in a single, infinite second.

The body of the nation — all of its rejects, its dispersed, its buried and its disappeared — remain a site of repeated attacks. Flinching — a reflex. Weeks after the blast, smoke from 'welding accidents' rises almost incessantly from the city, triggering the PTSD of its inhabitants. Those still missing under the rubble join those missing from the civil war. Every other day, a new tragedy, stacking on top of the others. Lives taken by wildfires in the mountains are as predictable as those lost to public self-immolations on the streets of the city. Both lethally forsaken by a negligent government. There is flinching, and then heartbreak, and then numbness. At the time of writing, the day's news reports are filled with images of Dima Kaissi, a woman who fell into a coma as a result of the August 4 Explosion and has just lost her life, 83 days later. Violence here is prolonged, meted out in instalments. It is only interspersed by our efforts to survive and punctuated by our romanticised and imaginary memories of better days, of a better Beirut. To belong to Beirut is to be held hostage by its perpetual sorrows. It is to be caught in an unrelenting dialectic of love and heartbreak. And then, there is more. The heartbreak of others which undoes you. For me, it was watching Elias Khoury's friends become pallbearers at 15. His mother heaving, through the tears, asking nobody and everybody if it was her fault for

1 Edward Said, Reflections on Exile and Other Essays (London: Granta, 2001), p. 173.

keeping him in his own country. I broke down that day, because even as I repeated over and over again that this wasn't normal, it shouldn't be our normal, I heard my own mother's voice from a phone call a few weeks back, urging me to stay in London, to never come back, to abandon my dreams for a future in Beirut because 'it was over'. "Forget us here. Keep your head down, stay there. You're our only hope."

Pls tell me you're okay

In a recent article for Raseef22, Ayman Makarem presents the predicament of so many Lebanese after the August4 Explosion with a searing clarity:

If people resist seeking treatment, in fear of diluting their rage and allowing the current power structures to remain, then that places them at direct odds with their individual recovery. This is the central dilemma of our current struggle: how do we overcome a national trauma whose pain we don't want to forget?

This struggle however remains an immemorial one. In 1982, Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish described the predicament of forgetfulness as a form of sovereign violence enacted by the Israeli state against Palestinians. By rendering Palestinians non-existent, they disappeared both as memories and as people. Yet by remaining wedded to the resistance of this erasure, the Palestinians ultimately found themselves suspended in an equal dialectic of love and heartbreak, bound by love to a Palestine which would never come back. Darwish's reflections were collated into the poem *Memory for Forgetfulness, Beirut 1982*, which Darwish wrote during the siege of Beirut by Israel in 1982. The poem was written in August, too. Has August become an auspicious month for Lebanon? Parallels deeper than the coincidence of time emerge between Darwish's recounting of the siege, and Atallah's writing on the blast. Both are surrounded by people who, in the long aftermath of tragedy, frequently ask them 'Am I Alive?'. How beautiful it is to find familiarity, even solace, in the writings of an ancestor. How devastating it is to feel like we live exiled in a loop.

From the early 19th century, generations after generations of Lebanese emigrated, going anywhere and everywhere, but here. Each generation handed down to the one after it intimate memories of the Lebanon they left behind. And each generation's history is marked by its own specific violence and sequential exodus. A woman explains to me that her family are surviving the economic crisis because a relative in Canada is able to send remittances back every so often: "Every single Lebanese family has somebody abroad; this is how it's always been." The story of Lebanon is a story of migration, so much so that it boasts a diaspora three times bigger than the size of its actual population. Even our economic model is built on migratory flows. This map details the pattern of remittances from the United States to Lebanon between 1914-1917. A century of dependance on remittances from abroad, coupled with a criminally organised Ponzi Scheme devised by the political elite and the central bank has resulted in an economy hollowed out from within, unable to sustain itself by other means. Recently imposed capital controls and withdrawal limits by Lebanese banks has meant that even remittances have been rendered inaccessible, or with any luck, extremely devalued at point of withdrawal. It is no surprise then that there is a new wave of migration out of Lebanon, when on the one hand the political elite hold the Lebanese hostage in their own country, while on the other, the banks effectively hold their wealth hostage. And even this route to salvation, marred as it is by desolation, is being closed off to most by a rise in border violence, marked by the militarisation of borders and criminalisation of immigrants in an ever increasing fascist and inward-looking West. In one fell and final blow, the Lebanese thus find themselves stuck between isolation and alienation: at home, their safe and familiar spaces have been irrevocably lost, and globally, they are subject to the dual pains of racism and exile.

But what does it mean to go forward? If we understand the world as being fundamentally organised around the principle of extractive and neoliberal capitalist anti-blackness, then we also understand that, while we are collateral damage in this project, the 'way forward' consists of a neo-imperialist developmental model whose goal is to sustain and reproduce this project. Globally, SAPs and IMF loans exploit the economies of the Global South, further plunging them into subservience, while corrupt and criminal heads of states and PEPs (politically exposed persons) complicit in this exploitation continue to receive global immunity for their crimes. We cannot critique the local without being attentive to global capitalist alliances. Regionally, we see economies in the UAE and Saudi Arabia flourishing because they are stratified along racial lines: literal modern-day slavery sustains these nations. Lebanon's Kafala system is microcosm of this system. The past year has seen scores of abandoned domestic workers, overwhelmingly black women and WOC from the Global South, being abandoned in the streets as their employers can no longer afford to keep them on. Our struggle is against an ideology and political economy which sees the way forward as being grounded in a return to our ability to exploit others. The symbol of our struggle against this neoliberal, criminal, corrupt kleptocracy has become the noose: after August 4, 'prepare the nooses' trended in Lebanon, it was graffitied onto the walls of the city, chanted at the protests, while actual nooses were installed in the squares, some could even be seen hanging from bridges, from car windows, from balconies. A murderous rage drove us, drives us still. Our struggle is against the very foundation of our world.

This place I love, unbearably, irredeemably, has been a noose for too many. In its modern history only, I count the Palestinians, the Syrians, immigrant domestic workers, refugees – those here and those trying to leave in what have locally been dubbed the 'death boats', women, Black people, poor people, disabled people, and the Lebanese people, over and over and over again. And yet, somehow, we always find ourselves nostalgic for a life, a past, that we never lived.

Is this what it means, to not be, as a subject, dehistoricised? To exist, so acutely, as a result - or consequence - of history? How fortunate, to not be wordless; how unfortunate to be adrift in the world. I don't want this history, I don't want to be from here, to carry its pain. And yet there is nowhere else I want to belong to, no other sea I want to be in love with. This is the nature of paradox so loved by literary critics: that those who live in them, by them, are infinitely fascinating objects for interpretation. Regardless of how unwanted this objectification is. And here, forgetfulness is not even an option, when banally those in the West, free from the weight of such history are able to coin phrases such as 'C'est Beirut'/'It's Beirut' — forever designating us as a signifier for chaos and violence, even as we desperately struggle to

move on, to survive our past and breathe in hopeful the future. Choice, agency, is taken away at every turn, epistemologically, politically, and culturally.

It feels peculiar that I am only now able to reflect on what it means to me to be from/of Lebanon (?), to be exiled, because I have witnessed from afar, over the past year, Lebanon's successive and rapid collapse. And as the nation crumbles all around me, so does what was my idea of it, my idea of myself, of my identity. I am desperate in so many ways, and for so many things. To fight off what feels like an irrepressible and unstoppable existential threat, to hold on to what is left of it all. To be grounded. But all that is left, all that surrounds me, is sea. Both literally and figuratively, it is memories and love of the Mediterranean that I can't let go off that hold me in the rift, that home me. But it is also a sea of sadness that exiles me from home, that reminds me that there is no ground beneath my feet, and no soil within reach of my fingers. Just sea.

All as well, for the violence of borders, of their exclusion, only impede the possibilities for a truly emancipated future. Perhaps there is opportunity in this pain: that it may serve us with the ability to rethink belonging, to break out of the loop, break out of the nation. In this moment of global insurgencies and revolutions against tyranny, people all over the globe are demanding the right to life, asking for the right to thrive, not just survive.

In Beirut, a protestor shouts in the face of an armed military bodyguard threatening him with a gun, “Shoot! Shoot!” as he hits his fists on his chest. In Lagos, a young man shouts “Cover her! Cover her!” to protect the woman documenting the Lekki Tollgate Massacre, which was carried out by the military, just as he was shot dead himself.

Such moments of resistance, of love, inspire loyalties which go beyond the organ of the state. Are we finally seeing the beginning of the demise of the nation-state? Is this the start of a watershed age of revolt against the rule of nation-states, warlords, the tyranny of the political hegemony of the West?

And the age of peoplehood, community, perhaps even archipelago-worlds, to incant Edouard Glissant? I am desperate for this hope to be true, for this future to be real. But haunting this very journey, our every step, are deja-vus of our past: threats of a return to the days of the civil wars, the bombs, unrest, coups, warlords. Threats to return to the past, as if they did not still rule us today, as if it was not our present.

In the shadow of this haunting, we flourish by relying on our communities instead. We reached out to one another, strangers who suddenly became family. We needed each other to sustain one another.

In Beirut, activists, volunteers and community organisations led the cleanup operations, provided shelter to the displaced, offered rehabilitation to the injured, set up memorials to the victims which were built from the ashes of the city; “We are the state”, read every slogan graffitied onto the walls of the city. The diaspora organised effectively, sending aid, goods. The global solidarity among people, the absolute strength of civil society across borders came together and saved lives.

Atallah has written that “the language around our collective trauma is still emerging”[2]. But all around me I see our language becoming embodied. Our bodies become language, and in the absence of language, we become witness. Despite the singularity of our experiences, we are able to witness the universality of its struggle.

Our language is the link, we are the link. The revolution needs art, it needs a language to keep its fire burning, and by existing, forced as we are into the rift, we stoke and sustain it. I don't know whether I am grateful, or devastated, in the knowledge that we have such a rich heritage of revolutionary language, but I do know that despite the nooses, our embodied languages will deliver on our dreams for a viable future for us all.

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https://www.gqmiddleeast.com/Beirut-explosion-Inside-Beiruts-Broken-Heart

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DIMA CHAMI is an academic and an activist based in the UK, where she works on biopolitics, human rights law, migration and West African literatures. Chami's research analyses the racial, cultural and political logics which underpin immigration policies in the West which in turn hierarchise humanity, and how literature challenges these, offering alternate emancipatory possibilities to our definitions of the human. She also organises bibliotherapy sessions within refugee and migrant communities in the UK, and is about to take up a new post at the University of Bristol, where she will work on a project on literary activism in Nigeria.

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JAZZ

A woman's worth in jazz

WORDS **BOKANG RAMATLAPENG** IMAGE **ELEPHANT MASEKO**
FOR **THE RECORDING OF IT HAS TO BE JAZZ – ONE SOUND**

Let us not make a mistake of thinking that jazz is separate from the personal lives of women in jazz. It is important to note that first and foremost, they are women and secondly, they are women in jazz. This order is crucial because often we overlook their personal needs and remain comfortable with just them as entertainers.

Her Own Skin

The impression of a young woman who is only in her early twenties decreeing that she is comfortable in her own skin is almost unheard of in a society that is built up on comparisons and certain standards of what she should be. *Her Own Skin* is an idea where no comparisons exist and ideals of perfection are not enforced upon her.

What made her come to the conclusion of being true to what woman she was becoming was not an easy journey. The career path that she chose consciously made her aware of the ills of the society she lives in. *Her Own Skin* is a very deep and profound expression and it is not to be taken lightly. In her case, it defines who she is and most importantly, that she is finally learning to be comfortable in her own skin. It takes a lot for a young woman who is only trying to take up her space in the real world to reach a level of self-worth.

It appears that her focus is on stopping violence against women. It is a good thing but there is a lot more to the problem because it has found its way into jazz. Imagine, for a minute, a young girl who would not bow to peer pressure and yet she is completely surrounded by peers whose interpretation of the arts is about belonging and doing what everyone else does. The culture of the arts seems to be characterised by heavy drinking, smoking and anything else that one can do to get 'high'. The temptation to conform is high, yet she knows it is not going to be easy to hold onto her beliefs or shall we say principles without being mocked for it.

When she was in her early high school years, where naming-calling was the norm, like "*Sister Christian*", which she began to loathe because she could not find a safe space to be herself. Unfortunately it created many lonely days and uncertainty about the future.

She wanted to be seen too but at the same time not compromising her self-worth. There were days where she fell prey to the pressure, which is normal for a young person coming of age.

Finally, an opportunity arose and she had to go to university. She thought to herself that things would be better because she would meet like-minded people; which she did.

With the scars from the past, she forged ahead and embraced all that she couldn't control. Her past experiences had already compelled her to become an adult. All she had and held onto were her strong principles and values, something her peers did not understand but eventually learnt to respect.

Through *Her Own Skin*, she is sharing a knowledge of self-worth and the beginning of braving the stormy seas and confronting everything that is thrown at her with grace.

It is *Her Own Skin* and no one can live in it!

This is simply an extract from Bokang Ramatlapeng's *Diaries of Her Own Skin*.

So, why did this article make the It Has To Be Jazz® project review? The plight of a girl child can never be left unattended. At some point the cycle has to be broken. Publishing this extract is a reminder that there is a lot that still needs to be achieved. We are not overlooking the fact that some strides have been made in this area but they are not enough.

BOKANG RAMATLAPENG is an author and host of Her Own Skin series with a particular focus on women in the arts space.

THE IT HAS TO BE JAZZ® PROJECT

is a self-funded international project with a key focus in jazz documentation and archiving. It is managed and run by jazz disciple and aficionado, Ray Maseko.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Memory, History, and Mourning: Reading Lesego Rampolokeng's and the Kalahari Surfers' *Bantu Rejex*

WORDS **DANYELA DIMAKATSO DEMIR** IMAGE **SISONKE PAPU**

"It begins with sound,"[1] Lesego Rampolokeng writes in his 2015 poetry book *A Half Century Thing*. This is a line which has reverberated in my mind for years. Which sound? Is it music? A scream? The silence which is filled with sound? For me, it is a gasp. It begins with a gasp.

It is a sunny Jo'burg winter day in June 2017 when I listen to Lesego Rampolokeng's and the Kalahari Surfers' album *Bantu Rejex*, which has just been released. I remember little but one line that jolted me out of whatever it was that I was doing that day: "Book spines break. Another fire over Rostock."[2]

1 Rampolokeng, Lesego. A Half Century Thing. Black Ghost Books, 2015. p. 62.
2 All quotes from the songs are taken from the Kalahari Surfers' Bandcamp page where most of the lyrics can be found, unless otherwise indicated.

This is when I remember the 9-year-old girl that was me, watching the fire over Rostock[3] and asking her father: "Why are they burning our homes?" My father, after a moment's hesitation – Did he want to assure me that all is well? Did he want to say don't worry. You are safe in those few seconds of silence filled with sound? – responds: "Because they hate us." And that is when and how I awoke from whatever dreams I might have had on the playground of meaningful friendships with white kids, of equality, of ever calling my birthplace 'home.' And It is this line from *Bantu Rejex* which compels me to write, to reflect, and remember.

The collaboration between The Kalahari Surfers and Lesego Rampolokeng has spanned over three decades and yet, despite having produced two albums, I have seen hardly any reviews or detailed commentary on Warrick Sony's and Rampolokeng's joint projects. This is a haunting gap, both in South African literary/musical criticism at large and academia in particular. I want to address this gap in the hope that my reading of *Bantu Rejex* can be the beginning of a conversation around this particular collaboration and perhaps its significance for both artists' oeuvres.

3 In August 1992 hundreds of right-wing extremists attacked asylum seekers' homes. These were the most violent and openly racist and right-wing extremist riots in post-war Germany to date and the Government's tardy and inadequate response added insult to injury.

Rampolokeng's musical collaborations are of course wide-ranging. He has performed with musicians such as Salim Washington and Sankofa, Louis Moholo, Shabaka Hutchings, and Tumi Mogorosi. However, of particular interest to me is his collaboration with the Kalahari Surfers' Warrick Sony,[4] not only because we have two full albums to think about, but also because it seems that both sound and poetry speak to each other, communicate communion, and diverge in manifold and fascinating ways.

Bantu Rejex is both a celebratory compilation of Rampolokeng and Sony's collaboration over three decades and at the same time it is a continuation of Rampolokeng's 2015 *A Half Century Thing* which marked both his 50th birthday and a quarter of a century since his debut poetry book *Horns for Hondo* (1990). Some of the 10 songs/poems have previously featured in Rampolokeng's oeuvre such as "Johannesburg" and "In Transition" in *Talking Rain* (1993), "Blue V's" in the eponymous book (1998), and "Bantu Rejex" in *A Half Century Thing* (2015). Other poems, such as "Coming off the Blue Train," "Supernatural Disaster," and "Temptation" only seem to feature on the album. Thus, the poems certainly offer glimpses into Rampolokeng's work whilst simultaneously showcasing new songs.

What strikes me when I listen to the album is the (dis)harmony between music and text and the effect that word and sound have on each other. Warrick Sony explains in a conversation with me that a lot of editing went into the process of producing *Bantu Rejex*. Creating tension and release, Sony says, and finding a way of foregrounding both music and words were very important for the editing process.[5]

4 Warrick Sony's stage name is The Kalahari Surfers.
5 I am paraphrasing Warrick Sony's answer in an unpublished interview I conducted with him in October 2019. All references to the conversation with Sony are taken from this interview.

It is this dialogue between word and sound which I shall attempt to trace in what follows. Although having said this, I must admit that, being no musicologist, the word might, at times, take over and leave the sound somewhat behind. I hope, however, that my gap will be filled by someone who is better versed than myself to speak about rhythm, compositions, and musical genres, which will do more justice to the intricate and complex compositions by Sony.

The curation/sequence of the 10 songs is carefully arranged as Sony assures me after I had been wondering whether the songs do not tell a story. Could the songs/poems perhaps be read as having a larger narrative? Not quite if one thinks of a conventional novel, of course, but since when has any part of Rampolokeng's oeuvre ever been conventional? Themes such as journeys (physical as well as spiritual and political), oppression, Black love, (failed/failing) revolutions, the fight for freedom, socio-economic injustice, as well as grief, mourning, and trauma are recurrent.

The first two songs, "Coming of the Blue Train" and "Johannesburg"[6] are thematically linked. They both speak of socio-economic disparities, capitalist machineries, and the disposability of human (particularly Black) lives.

The sound in "Coming off the Blue Train" is harsh. The electric guitar announces an event that might or might not happen. The rhythm of the song reminds me of a train ride, and Rampolokeng's performance sounds slightly distanced, almost as if coming from a loudspeaker on the Blue Train, South Africa's most high-end train. At the same time, 'Blue Train' is slang for benzine which is strained through a loaf of bread, consumed as a 'substitute' for alcohol by the marginalised, forgotten, homeless people in South Africa who cannot afford the 'real deal.' The lyrics are chilling and the imagery is haunting. The opening lines remain edged in my mind: "The judas-finger that pointed was prosthetic in a velvet glove!" Are we then living on a train/in a world of such materiality and do we live such an artificial existence that even one of the most hurtful human actions, betrayal, has

6 "Johannesburg" was first published in Rampolokeng's Talking Rain (Cosaw 1993) and was subsequently recorded, together with Blue v's.

become a commodified thing cloaked in a "velvet glove" and stripped of human attributes? Spiritual retreat seems no longer possible for prayers are: "sent out into polluted space to junkie-gods on the nod." And still the train rhythm is steady and the sound is haunting. I hear two poems in one. Sound and word speak to each other, the rhythm of the train reminding me of the Blue train and the lyrics insisting that the precarious existence of those who drink the Blue Train be heard. And I am not sure where the train ride will take us. If the next title on the album, "Johannesburg," is meant to be the destination, it is a grim one.

"Johannesburg" can be read as a continuation of Mongane Wally Serote's poem "City Johannesburg," as Sindiswa Busuku reminded me in one of our many conversations about the album. These two poems, of course, do not stand alone. Much has been written in fiction and nonfiction alike about the so-called City of Gold and Rampolokeng's own oeuvre is riddled with images of the cruelty of Johannesburg. One only has to remember the narrator in *Bird-Monk Seding* (2017) describing Johannesburg as "that soul-polluting city I am cursed with calling my birth place."[7]

Johannesburg has been re-recorded by Sony and Rampolokeng for *Bantu Rejex* and both Rampolokeng's performance of the poem and the music sound more hopeless and disillusioned than in the first recording released in the 90s. There is nothing flattering, exciting or hopeful about Johannesburg in Rampolokeng's poem where the lives of Black people count nothing since "our birth is a lie" and the city is treacherously "paved with judas gold deceptions and lies."[8]

There is no echo of the hopeful beginnings of many "Jim Comes to Jo'burg" novels, but it certainly resonates with many endings of that particular genre. The horror and trauma the city is built on foreclose any chance of a free future for those whose ancestors have died in the underground of Jozi and who are still the labour force which is relegated to the margins of the city:

> *We just rush to die without living Just existing*
> *to keep the money belt spinning*
> *[...]*

The rhythm of the song seems deliberately slow. The melody snippets and a voice that calls/shouts in the beginning of the song evoke an unhomely feeling in me. This is not the Freudian sense of the word 'unheimlich,' which signals the 'return of the repressed,'[9] but it is closer to Homi Bhabha's definition of the word 'unhomely,' which signifies a (post)colonial subject's sense of non-belonging.[10] Perhaps it is Rampolokeng's dragging out of certain words and syllables, as if to highlight the painful existence of 'living' in Johannesburg, simultaneously refusing to yield to the fast-paced, murderous rush of the city, that reflects this unhomely feeling. Is this slow performance, this refusal to be dragged into the rush, challenged by the musical background noise I ask myself whilst listening to "Johannesburg" in the very same city? Or perhaps the refusal is eclipsed by the poet's own words which are a haunting reminder to, and constant reality for, all of us People of Colour and Black people, whether we live in Johannesburg or not when he says: "Neither politics nor prayer can guarantee the future"?

Later on in the album, I find a similar strange pairing that tells me a story. "Blackness"[11] and "Minority Report (Whiteness)," evidently speak to each other. For a long time I listen to both songs almost subconsciously, paying less attention to them in comparison to the rest of the album.

Perhaps this is because other songs, such as "Bantu Rejex," held me more enthralled at first. But inexplicably, of late, they demand to be heard. "Blackness" is a short poem which has some of the most powerful and beautiful lines in the album:

> *My Blackness cuts up the Light / The light cuts up my blackness*
> *The light descends and strikes / To the heart of the night*
> *Dusk around my head / The night"*

I am reminded of both Frantz Fanon and Mafika Gwala. The poem is perhaps a continuation of Fanon's painfully 'real' description of how whiteness strips Black people of their dignity and humanity. I remember the words in *Black Skin White Masks*: "Where am I to be classified? Or, if you prefer, tucked away? [...] Where shall I hide? [...] My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white Winter day."[12] However, at the same time the opening line evokes Mafika Gwala's insistence in "Getting off the Ride" when he says: "They say the Black Ghost is weak. That it is feeble and cannot go the distance. I say that's their wishful thinking."[13]

The music sounds slightly lighter than in previous songs and I am thinking of a push-pull effect between the past and the future. Chants that ground the listener are entangled with futuristic electronic music. These opposites perhaps point to the resonance of both Fanon's deep despair and Gwala's empowering words. In his poem, Rampolokeng reminds us that both feelings, and perhaps political positionalities resulting from these feelings, can exist side by side and that there is defiance in grief and grief in defiance.

With no time to breathe between the songs, the sound changes. The lightness is gone and now gives way to an uncanny feeling that is a mixture between the Freudian uncanny, the fear of the long known, and the fear of 'the Other' in Edward Said's sense of the term, where the unknown, the strange, is the source of white anxiety and paranoia.[14] "Minority Report" is a duet between Sony and Rampolokeng. The beginning (Sony's words) tell the story of a break-in:

> *There's a noise downstairs – Put on your clothes*
> *Somebody is breathing – Standing quite close*
> *There's a man in the darkness*
> *I can feel his light*
> *Don't call security – I think it's all right*

Rampolokeng's part of the song has little to do with the opening scene, except for the fear for one's life. Perhaps I should rather say except for the fear of a terrible death or, more poignantly still, the prophecy of dying a violent death in the moment of one's birth:

> *to be born and not to die*
> *with a bullet in the gut and lie and bleed*
> *in the dirt and a cigarette that won't light*
> *and when it does smoke comes through the throat*[15]

There is no resolution. We hear that journalists arrive and a shooting must have happened. We do not know who is shot. The song's dark atmosphere underlines the white fear and paranoia that is reflected in Sony's part of the poem as well as the real and all-pervading fear of having one's existence crushed by the hands of white people on the part of Black people in Rampolokeng's part. It is the uncanny feeling that the music evokes and the reminder of the concept of the Other through these disparate experiences which makes these opposites be in conversation somehow, though not in dialogue. But what stays with me is the dark sound of the music and the unbridgeable divide that is captured in the duet.

Yet, I am avoiding something. I started with the beginning and jumped to the end. No, in fact, I began with the middle, but I abandoned it for the beginning and the end. So I must speak about the two songs that are in the middle in the hope that thereafter, others will fill the

7 Rampolokeng, Lesego. Bird-Monk Seding. Deep South, 2017. p. 63.
8 Rampolokeng, Lesego. Talking Rain. Cosaw, 1993. p. 10
9 Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." 1919. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 17. Edited and translated by James Strachey. Hogarth Press, 1955. pp. 243-258.
10 Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. Routledge, 1994. pp. 8-11.
11 The poem is an extract from "Dusk Around my Head", published in blue v's (1998).
12 Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. Grove Weidenfeld, 1967. p. 113.
13 Gwala, Mafika Pascal. Jol'iinkomo. AD. Donker, 1977. pp. 64-65.
14 Said, Edward. Orientalism. Pantheon Books. 1978.
15 Rampolokeng's part of the song is, in fact, his poem "Haul in and Pull Out" that was published in Blue v's (1998).

gaps that I am creating by not addressing all the songs on the album.

The most fascinating songs, the two tracks that I have been returning to as if to speak to familiar companions, are "Bantu Rejex" and "Child Soldier."

"Child Soldier," Sony tells me, was originally an instrumental composition and Rampolokeng added the lyrics somewhat later.[16] Music and words seem deliberately out of step with each other. The sound reminds me of hasty steps, running in an unfamiliar territory. Perhaps someone/a group of people is fleeing from/towards somewhere? The chants, Sony says, are taken from a documentary about child soldiers in the Congo who are singing whilst rowing a boat.

It is not, however, merely the eerie music which haunts me. Rampolokeng's poem deserves its own analysis. I cannot do it justice here, but one line echoes through the years since the album's release: "How to embalm a phantom." Is this perhaps one of the most powerful definitions of melancholia that I have read in all my years of studying this concept? Is the grieving subject "embalm[ing] a phantom," a memory, of the lost object of love, be it a beloved person, a home or a fundamental right, such as freedom that (s)he cannot let go of, that will be remembered, commemorated, held onto at the expense of one's own sanity?

The fleeing/running continues, the chants are repeated, and we hear the following words:

> *leader of the revolution is feeder*
> *of assimilation*
> *steward on the march to*
> *deprivation*
> *and we move*
> *out of the gravy & into the stew*
> *it's a short walk to the sewer [...]*

This paints a terrifying picture of a failed/failing revolution, of anger, and grief. There is little left to hope for and nothing to hold on to whilst the music is running and lines from the poem are repeated, like fragments, like broken shards of glass.

This despair, this failed revolution, described in "Child Soldier" echoes the ending of "Bantu Rejex": "They kiss it, on their knees at the feet of the Emperor & his entourage." "Bantu Rejex" is, in Sony's words, "a song with a 'traditional' dub rhythm" with complex and many layered sounds and words that make up a collage of powerful contradictions. The music seems almost joyful, the rhythm invites me to dance. The chants in the background are hopeful and sometimes they pull me away from the poem, but the performer's voice, calm yet simultaneously sharp and ironic, insists that I listen to the words. And in the beginning I gasp again. I remember Rostock and tell my friends of the horror and fear I felt and still feel in the aftermath of the event, even almost three decades later. Would I have spoken of Rostock to anyone in Johannesburg had it not been for that one line "another fire over Rostock"? Probably not. Would I have forgotten about it? Most certainly not. Would my Black friends and friends of Colour here have known less of the trauma that people in the Diaspora, in Germany, went through during Rostock had I not, prompted by that one line, remembered to tell them? Yes, very possibly.

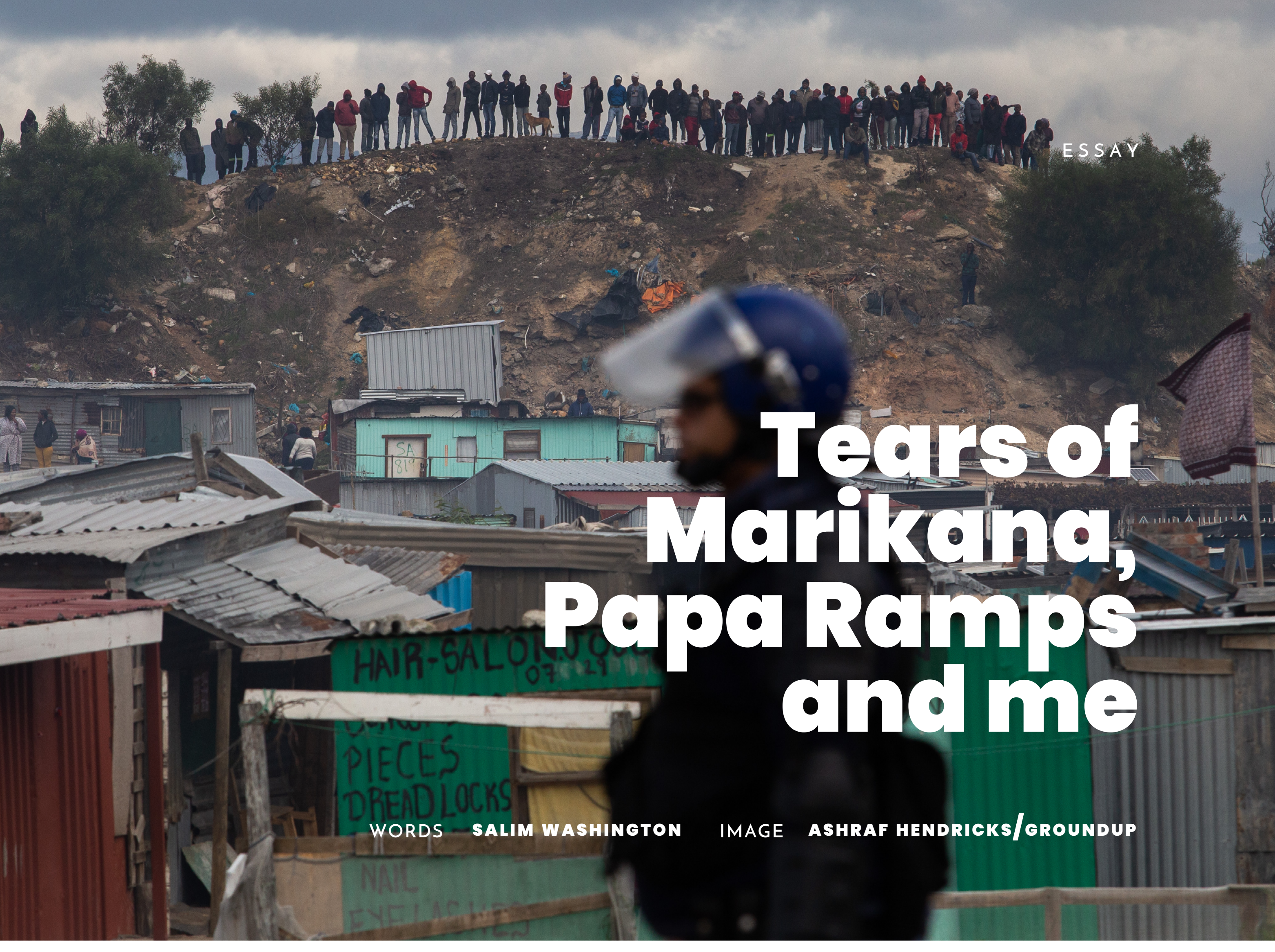
But what of the contrasts in the song? What of the poem that speaks of disillusion on so many levels and the chants in the chorus? There is a question that the poem demands to have answered:

> *Generation of the apathetic*
> *Who will incite the yawners?*

I have little to offer by way of a response, but, perhaps, in China Miéville's words, there will be "hope for hope"[17] if we keep listening to the words, the chants, and lastly, the trumpet in the song which might be calling the listener to action? To listen more carefully and to keep going, to pay attention to the word, the rhythm and the chants, and, above all, to remember.

16 The poem consists of two fragments which are taken from Rampolokengt's play Bantu Ghost (Mehlo-Maya 2009, pages 35 and 53) and which have been slightly altered in "Child Soldier."

17 See China Miéville, "Conversation 2017." https://youtu.be/2hj_Oigys5g.



ESSAY

Tears of Marikana, Papa Ramps and me

WORDS **SALIM WASHINGTON** IMAGE **ASHRAF HENDRICKS/GROUNDUP**

As a human being the Marikana massacre was a devastating event. It occurred right when I had emigrated to Mzansi, excited about the prospects of contributing in some small way to a young nation with immense revolutionary potential. There are many things that I love about life in South Africa, the poetry and the music holding primary place in my imagination and spiritual life. There are also ugly realities that living here foist upon us all.

For me, the massacre that occurred, the killing, slaughtering miners who were striking to earn 12,500 rands per month from a company that profited 40 billion US dollars encapsulated in horrific detail the worst aspects of life in South Africa as it is lived by those who make it such a rich country while suffering indignities and oppression. This event involved not only the struggle between the proletariat and the capitalists, it involved the state, from a militarized police force right up to the highest levels of the executive government.

As an artist the massacre was a call to action. It was not possible to be unaffected and my calling as a musician prompted me to respond artistically. As a musician I felt the need once again to go beyond my beloved melodies and harmonies, to blend the rhythms of music with that of words.

Lesego Rampolokeng was the perfect choice for my collaboration. I first met him at a

literary festival in Durban, Poetry Africa 2015. He had just published his latest poetry anthology, A Half Century Thing. I was drawn to him most especially during the question and answer period after his book talk. His brilliance was obvious of course, but what also stood out for me was his fearlessness. He was ruthless in his critique not only of racist oppression, but all manner of evil, including the larceny of the petit bourgeoisie, and the corruption of the state. It was not just his critique, but the hipness of his persona, the multi-layered inside talk that peppered the academic arguments, the devastating humor. In his invention and usage of irony, satire, and ridicule that made him stand out. "You can get a copy of A half century thing from the gentleman in the back who works for Exclusionary Books [Exclusive Books, for those of you who are not in South Africa]."

When it was time for the audience to ask question they appeared to be too afraid to engage him. His lack of reverence for the very body that honored him to participate in the festival, and his trenchant commentary on many of the sacred cows of South African culture and history. I was intrigued. Afterwards, I spoke with him getting his contact details and a promise to collaborate one day. I remember telling him that he reminded me of Amiri Baraka, who is the most versatile of all the major African American literary artists. Baraka has canonical works in many categories: poetry, essays, short stories, drama, music criticism. He is also on firealways and ready to assassinate with his words with lines that are as deadly as they are beautiful. Add to this he is the "father of black nationalism", one of the leaders in both protest and electoral politics. Lesego is just that type of brilliant literary and performing artist. A seemingly larger than life maelstrom of creative energy that speaks from a place of brilliance if of anger. When I mentioned why he reminded me of Baraka he wryly added "yes, minus the political chameleon act." I knew right then and there that he was the one with the perspective and skills, the courage and integrity (political and artistic) to collaborate with, and I soon began composing the music for "Tears of Marikana."[1]

Of course, I was thinking of the historic music by Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln "Tears for Johannesburg," recorded after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. Their musical response was of course political, but part of its political edge was the daring aesthetics that they employed in the music. I understood that language and what was at stake. I would write music and record it on the piano for Lesego to listen to. He would write poetry for me to read, inspiring me further. We continued this refining process, first with just me and him, and then in rehearsals with the entire band, up until its first performance at the Orbit in Johannesburg followed by a recording. I was fortunate to have formed Sankofa, featuring Nduduzo Makhathini (piano), Dalisu Ndlazi (bass), Leon Sharnick (alto saxophone), Sakile Simani (trumpet), and though the primary drummer was Ayanda Sikade, for "Tears of Marikana" the drummer was Tumi Mogorosi. I was fortunate to have a band that had been built around my compositional and playing needs, a unit flexible enough to encompass all that had to be said in this context. "Tears of Marikana" is in three parts. Part One is "Entabeni, Blues Preparation." The music melodic content is shared between the bass and the alto flute. It is a slow, serene feel in the sumptuous key of D-flat. It is a blues progression that represents the time spent in the mountains by the miners preparing for their protest and their protection. Lesego's words are softly spoken and mirror the dissonance of the music with its whole tone harmonic spaciness, its insistence upon the major seventh as a melodic element, juxtaposed with the lushness of the key. Immediately he takes us past the particulars of the workers demands, describing in stark terms the inhumanity of the enterprise, explaining how for monetary profits the workers bodies are spent and killed. How those to blame for this perversion includes the captains of capitalism, with black people ironically perpetuating the exploitation of black labor even through the judicial system and other arms of the state.

The second movement is called "Engagement/ Confrontation" and is in two parts. It begins with a hymn like declaration from the piano and then by the ensemble. It transitions into a hopeful declaration as the miners make their demands known. One hundred twelve miners were then shot, killing thirty four persons. Musically there are 34 claps from the orchestral whip and disarray ensues. Melodic lines dissolve into frantic atonal searches, into a rhythmic maelstrom. Here there is the improvisational brilliance of Nduduzo Makhathini leading us into the unknown through collective improvisation. Through the words of Rampolokeng this is where lyrically the hopes of the strikers are met with the brutality of the armed state. Spiritual practices are met with warfare and the verdant hopes are dashed in the struggle. The cracking of skulls is invoked as both a reference to part one in which the capitalist system is revealed as rapacious, and also to the literal dehumanizing enterprise of stuffing workers underground for platinum dreams and buffalo soldier perversions.

The third movement is as yet untitled. It harkens to what can our sane response be to such a damning incidence of violence and oppression. The music employs a Mingus-like gospel vamp, this time featuring the bluesy brilliance of saxophonist Leon Sharnick. Again, we are well into the realm of irony. While the vamp and the improvisations that interact with it suggest creativity and give space for possibility of something better, there is no resolution. Both the music and the poetry imply the blues sensibility. That is, truth telling without sentimentality. Whither now? What with a scam of democracy, with a government tied to a party whose best work is firmly in the past? With an economy based upon an inhumane treatment of its workers? Lesego Rampolokeng delivered in performance and construction a poem that perfectly compliments the music as conceived—a testament to the resilience of humanity, even as man obliterates man in the pursuit of filthy lucre. A lyrical representation of the horror that was Marikana, a mirror for us to gaze into when we want an honest picture of ourselves.

1 You can listen to "Tears of Marikana" here: https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=w8SLxvv37AA&list=RDAMVMw8SLxvv37AA

Arabang ditsebi

BY MAMOSEBETSI MOSIA

Arabang ditsebi le itse le a tseba lona bo tsebanyane

bo matseba tsohle!

A hlaha, a latolwa

A hola, a sokola

A ipotsa, a se ikarabe

A ipatla, a se ifumane

Arabang ditsebi le itse le a tseba lona bo tsebanyane bo matseba tsohle!

A hloka bohlokomedi ho ba leloko, a ferekana maikutlo

A hloka tshehetso ho bao e leng baratuwa, a fela matla

A hloka botshepehi hoba a ba bitsang metswalle, a

nyahama moya

A hloka mofuthu wa lerato ho batswadi, a taboha pelo

Arabang ditsebi le itse le a tseba lona bo tsebanyane bo matseba tsohle!

A kokota mamati a se bulehe

A sebetsa ase fumane moputso

A bala a se bone tswelopele

A dumela feela tsohle tsa se loke

Arabang ditsebi le itse le a tseba lona bo tsebanyane bo matseba tsohle!

Thapelo ya hae ya feta kgwele ka botelele

A tiya tumelong jwalo ka Moshe mohlanka wa Modimo

A ba le mamello jwalo ka ngwetsi, a ngalla motsheo

Tears for Marikana

(for Salim Washington)

BY LESEGO RAMPOLOKENG

1

Injuries in prison
Dead bodies on cranes
Caterpillar tip where corpses
Cart the pillars of commerce
& for the wounds the Cause is the gauze
(oh gawd) the hyenas take each a piece

Fire on the mountain no metaphor
But matter for more
Than just thought
Lives sold & bought
For platinum dreams
A Buffalo Soldier perversion

The dead brought to court
Death-cries filling the yawn of board-rooms
Righteous vindication in the sin-cum statements

Pendulum swing & crack
The mine-worker's cranium
Mud in the veins
Blood down the drains/Brains in the cistern
Capital a psycho-sewer-system

2

Mind over matter is
Bullets to water
& that is Qamata
Sachatha
Saphalaza
Sashis' impepho
Time Green was the land
We wrapped around
And NOT the rand

Degradation dehumanization
Sub-terra immersion visceral
Underground-human literal
Skull-crack like rock-fall
Life-fluid polishing the power-hall

Degradation dehumanization
Sub-terra immersion visceral
Underground-human literal
Skull-crack like rock-fall
Life-fluid polishing the power-hall

First the rodents scupper
Then the rifles thunder
& into the smoke & silence
Enters the world of wonder
First the grief
Then the atom-bombed relief
& still, ain't shit invincible

Circus animals in cages
Going down to the heart of things
No fun no games
Just journey to the core of shame
Flip it & to the surface rise human organs
Stone precious cos
It reaches beyond bone
Dust…the lungs collapse
Greed…ever in relapse
The Power-Drug the worst
The Predator Birds come to rest
And the vultures hover
Death-lovers
Death loves us
To Bits scattered across the mountain side…
Where we gon' run & hide
On Bleeding stumps & shattered innards…
Corporate-greed rewards

3

Bankrupt morality system
Broken terror machinery
Democracy scam
Equality sham
Shackled judiciary
Police state security
Military safety
The executive smutty
Ruling Party Beholden
Sustenance on heroic stories
Romance appeals to past glories
No happy ever after laughter among the gory

Burning intestines send men
Down the Earth-vein
Where never was meant the tread of MAN
A humanity erosion

REVIEW

Intricacies of literary genres in Rampolokeng's *Bird Monk Seding*

WORDS **SAM MATHE** IMAGE **TS'ELISO MONAHENG**

Herman Charles Bosman looms large in popular imagination as a giant of the short story genre. His Groot Marico tales occupy a unique place in South African literature as peerless vignettes that have poignantly captured the soul of rural Afrikaner life in the early decades of the 20th century. The master storyteller's spellbinding narrator, Oom Schalk Lourens is a literary creation and raconteur without equal in local fiction.

"I can tell the best stories of anybody in the Transvaal," he boasts in *Mafeking Road* (1935), one of Bosman's celebrated classics. And as Oom Schalk wisely observes, it is not the story that counts. What matters is the way it is told. So it didn't come as a surprise to me when few years ago poet and writer Lesego Rampolokeng told me that he was going to the Groot Marico in search of Bosman's ghost. Perhaps it was his way of saying that he was done with the rat race of the concrete jungle and was looking for saner and less haunted environments where he could find some peace of mind and inspiration for some creative writing. Maybe he was looking for a writer's retreat in a region that has inspired the creation of immortal characters such as Krisjan Lemmer – "the biggest liar in the Bushveld."

Or it could be that he was making a statement that literature and art are no respecters of racial borders – that in the process of storytelling a writer should embrace his society in its contradictions and complexities. Whatever motivated him to leave his native Soweto and relocate to Groot Marico, the result is a book that rewrites the rules of South African fiction. Although the author describes this innovative and refreshing literary venture as a novel, it is actually a multi-layered work that intricately weaves together various literary genres and conventions the likes of which South African literature has never seen.

As in Bosman's *voorkamer* stories the novel has a principal narrator – Bavino Sekete, in his own words a hobo and nomad – 'a sentient being' who dabbles in poetry and prose and the rest that accompany these two. The author's first name is a reference to Bavino Bachana, his

alternative name as it reflects in the anthology, the *Bavino Sermons* (1999). The setting is the Soweto of the 1970s/1980s and Leseding, a small rural township in Madikwe, as the Tswana natives of Groot Marico refers to the North West district. If this was a movie, it would have been screened in flashbacks showing glimpses of a Soweto boyhood defined by epic soccer clashes at Orlando Stadium, the grim exploits of the Lovers Lane serial killer and the historic 1976 student uprisings – among others.

But the author's cinematic writing is equal to the task. It transports the reader back to the era of bioscopes of kung fu movies and spaghetti westerns, Scope magazine and comic books Grensvegter, Tessa and Die Wit Tier. Fast-forward to contemporary South Africa. Leseding means 'place of light' – a meaning which is in stark contrast to its desperately destitute state. It is a cesspool of immorality and alcoholism, a God-forsaken slum of poverty and hopelessness – an indictment on the fathers of democracy who promised the long-suffering black populace a place of milk and honey or at least a dignified existence through the provision of basic services, decent jobs and quality education.

Leseding is a place of dashed hopes and shattered dreams where racism still rules supreme. "The farmer owns this world," the narrator informs us after a farmhand was whipped to death by the farmer Oubaas with the help of the deceased's black colleagues. The tragic incident occurred after the farm worker had objected to being called a baboon. "Even my dog is smarter than they are. I tell it to go fetch the sheep. It goes, it gets them, it lines them up. And into the kraal. But them, they are stupid, all bloody baboons...' Oubaas had said, referring to his farm employees. There are equally cruel white employers in the retail shops, bottle stores, butcheries, brothels and shebeens of Leseding. Some of them are Chinese and Indian merchants. Blacks are the only ones who are at the receiving end in this post-apartheid community.

For them rice and peas/ for us lice and fleas...

Rampolokeng's lyrical poetry is an essential element of the novel. It poignantly captures his innermost feelings where prose and other literary devices fall short of meeting the objective. It is also a device he masterfully applies to eloquently express his abiding passion for jazz, for in the midst of the grime and crime of ghetto life that he unflinchingly, unapologetically and graphically paints, there is a soundtrack of jazz. The poetry – and by extension the book – is a requiem to the music of Charlie "Bird" Parker, Thelonius Monk, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis – bebop's rebels and iconoclastic inventors.

"You can't write in the modern jazz idiom without noting a debt to Bird," the narrator tells us. And you can't write the story of jazz without mention of Kippie Moeketsi, Philip Tabane, Johnny Dyani, Dudu Pukwana, Mongezi Feza, Louis Moholo, Victor Ndlazilwana, McCoy Mrubata and other big South African names of this celebrated sound.

The author either extols their genius in poetry or he quotes gems from them. All in all, the book shows how the jazz soundtrack has punctuated the black experience on both sides of the Atlantic. Amid this constant celebration of jazz is the salute of literary heroes that have shaped the author's literary identity as a distinct voice in South African writing. These include writers and poets Mafika Gwala, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Ingoapele Madingoane, Lefifi Tladi alongside painters Dumile Feni, Fikile Magadlela and Thami Mnyele. He writes scathingly about the hypocrisy of a society that neglects its heroes but claims them when they are gone.

Similarly, he recalls with bitterness Peter Makurube's last days on earth when those who neglected him came out to pay respects. The writer, filmmaker, broadcaster, cultural activist and talent scout had devoted his entire life to promoting the arts in this country, yet he never received any formal recognition for his selfless contribution. Rewind to the place of light. Whereas Bosman's characters are essentially white people with few blacks on the periphery of his narratives, Rampolokeng's Leseding inhabitants are both races – both portrayed as real and rounded individuals instead of caricatures, a microcosm of contemporary South Africa.

The fact that he throws staid literary conventions through the window of grammatical correctness makes this a fresh voice in South African writing. It is not just a story of a community. It is a hard-hitting commentary on the state of the nation – including a critique of its creative writing.

"Most South African literature is dead. Across race, genre, generation...i draw no inspiration from it. I'm not knocking people but stating what is to me, as writer and avid reader, a fact," the narrator tells us.

SAM MATHE is the 2018/2019 winner of the Literary Journalism Awards category of the South African Literary Awards (SALA). He's a founding editor and publisher of *Jazz Life Magazine* as well as contributing author of South Africa's Greatest Entrepreneurs (MME Media, 2010), *Brenda Fassie: I Am Not Your Weekend Special* (Picador Africa, 2014) and *Joburg Noir* (Jacana Media, 2020). A specialist writer and commentator on South Africa's cultural history and heritage, he has contributed widely on a number of South African newspapers and magazines including *Pace*, *Drum*, *Mail & Guardian*, *The Star*, *Sunday Independent*, *Sowetan*, *Rapport* and *Afropolitan*, a business and cultural magazine he edited.

This article is a revised version of Sam Mathe's review of *Bird-Monk Seding* which first appeared in the *Cape Argus* on 27 February 2018.

Theha tsebe

BY MAMOSEBETSI MOSIA

Theha tsebe o mamele, o
utlwisise bophelo bo naka
dimaripa bo a hlaba qalo
hae tshwane hohang le
qetelo!

Ba qala bao hohele ka
kgauta, ebe e bona mahe
hae bone leraba

Ba latele ka hoo rekela
dimonyamonya,o bone
hantle hao tshwasitse o sa
tjheha

Ba o apese tsa mabitso
diaparo,o phamise mahetla
jwalo ka Pikoko Ba o ntshe
motse, o bine "Nonyana dina
le matlu di dula monateng"

Theha tsebe o mamele, o
utlwisise bophelo bo naka
dimaripa bo a hlaba qalo
hae tshwane hohang le
qetelo!

Tokotoko nako ese kae, o
tlabe ole Ntetekeng, Dikeledi
Ese kgale o tlabe ole la
tlhekefetso ya motabo
lehlasipa Tsatsi le atla, o
tlabe o le dithethefatsing

Lemoha ngwana moAfrika
lefu le dutsi ntlheng ya kobo,
Re se o binele"Re bafiti
fatsheng leena"

Theha tsebe o mamele, o
utlwisise bophelo bo naka
dimaripa bo a hlaba qalo
hae tshwane hohang le
qetelo!

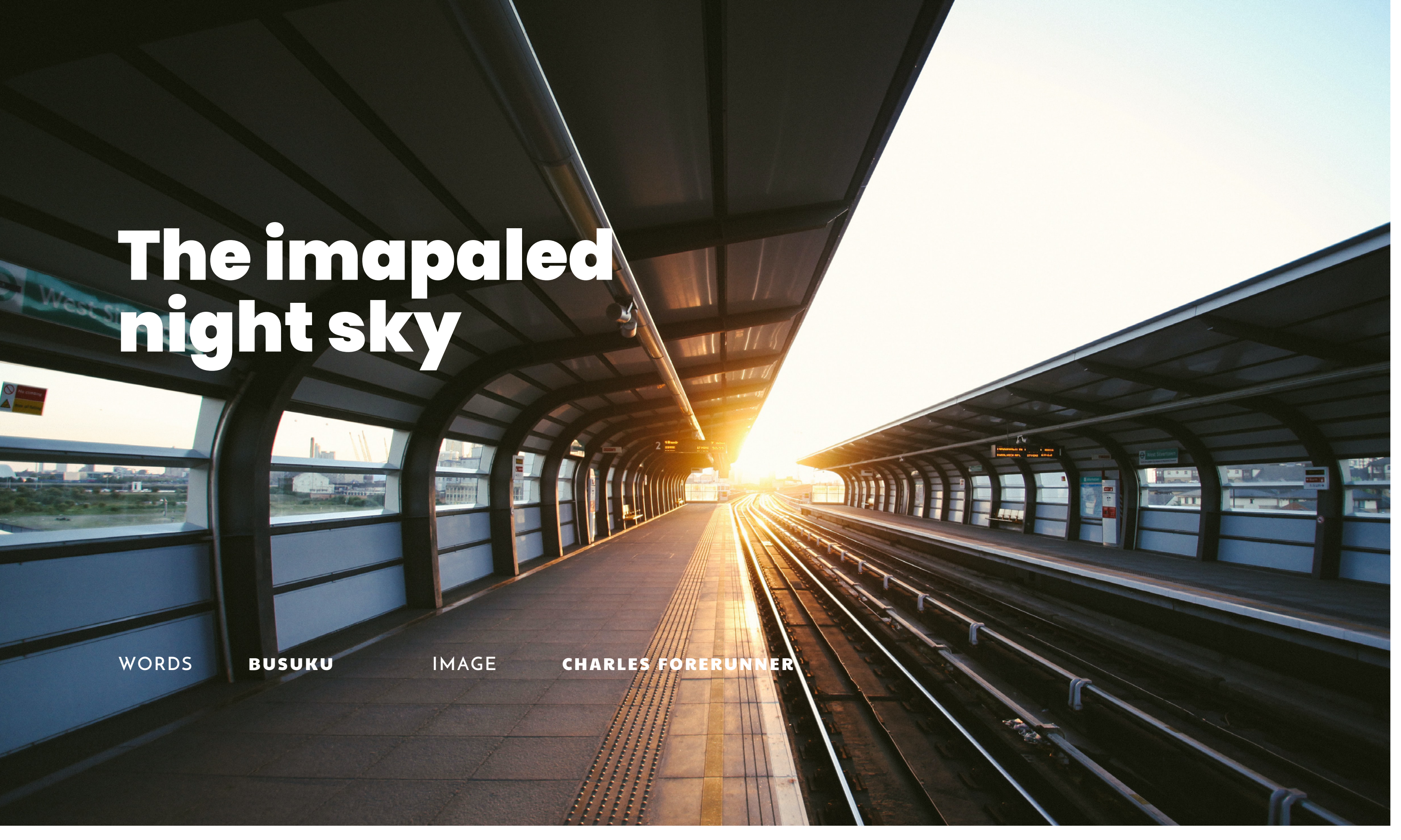
Otseotse bula mahlo o se
iphumane tsatsi leo
phirimelletse lefifi ele la
honka Ntjana

Tseketseke theha tsebe o se
ikutlwele bohloko thaka tsa
hao di tswetse pele jwalo ka
matswele

Phauphau sebedisa kelello
ose itshole wa phela ka mphe
mphe hoba yona e ya lapisa
motho o kgonwa ke sa hae

Lathalatha phaphama ose
salle morao jwalo ka
mangwele a Kgolo

MAMOSEBETSI AGNACIAS MOSIA is poet who writes in Sesotho. Her work deals with women, tradition, love and mortality. Her poems has been selected and featured in Avbob Poetry Competition. She lives in Bloemfontein, Free State.



The imapaled night sky

WORDS **BUSUKU** IMAGE **CHARLES FORERUNNER**

Sometimes, I think about the journey we took. We sat on a train, together, seated in the middle row of an overcrowded carriage. Outside, it's drizzling. The reading lamp does not work. The moon is still. On the table, a red tealight candle ignites of its own will. The passengers are huddled, silent, hands folded in prayer, and somewhere, slowly, a glass of water is tipping over.

For three days and three nights, hour after hour, the train plays the same song, the same song by Zim Ngquwana, the same song, over and over and over, *kubi emadodeni, siyagodola*[1]

Yesterday, like today, I pressed my copper head hard against the rattling window. The old Blue Train, salt-rusted, pushes along the steel tracks, pulls us further and further away, steam hissing as the sound of roasting baritones spills out the boiler room.

From beyond the dirty window, beyond, somewhere, not too far off, the old Millennium Tower plays hide-and-seek behind a chalking curtain of fog, her spire rises and falls with the tide. The sky is steel-plated, muscular and charged, high above the hardened industrial landscapes of grey which passes in the backdrop. And, around us, from every side, far at sea, by water, in many places, in places where voices no longer carry, there are certain things that, that were once mine. There are certain things that were slaughtered not too long ago, hushed heads bowed, alone, side by side. There were things, certain, slaughtered not too long ago, beneath the anvil and the cleaver, things almost forgotten in Farewell Square, in the Playhouse Theatre.

There are things, there were things, certain. Like the sound of children riding round and round the carousel, the swingboat, the cable cars hitched high above the Marine Parade at Fun World. There are things, certain, tall in the sun. There, in the distance, there is us, walking, together, vanilla ice-cream dripping off our cones, us, licking and licking and licking, tongues rouge, we walked the promenade, skin sticky and sweetened in the nectared noon.

* * * * *

And, here, we are now sitting on The old Blue Train.

The world outside, out in the distance, is gone now. Out there, gone, no sun on the rise, no nectar noon, gone, in the blink of an eye, in a single glance. And so, whipped and beaten comes the, whipped and beaten comes the, the cold and the rain, the bruises left in leaving. And, here, all eyes keeping watch are beaten for, are beaten for looking, for listening, listening for the sound of home, for the sound of that heavy breathing.

And so, why does it hurt to say? And so, why does it hurt to say?

It doesn't matter, all eyes are made still, all ears made obedient. But look. Out there, thousands of abandoned cars and trucks pile up, look there, all the cars and trucks turn pavements and parking lots into metal graveyards. And here, looking back, day to day, there are too many shapes, too many colours, there are dockyards and ships, factories and warehouses, all deserted, beyond large volumes of gas belching out bodies of water.

* * * * *

A little girl, all the way in the front of the train, sat and waited for the bubbly build up, for the pressure, for the high columns of steam to blast through the surface like a hot bursting pipe. Every now and then, with each blast, she clapped her hands and made big whooshing sounds. Her older brother tugged her away from the window. He sat her down, smoothing out her afro-puffs which softly sprouted out either side of her head much like the flowering of baby's breath. After that, they sat close together. She begged him to give her half of his green Fizzer.

He said no, and told her one day she is going to rot her teeth.

* * * * *

Looking out, most of the libraries and hospitals outside the Capital were shut down, one after the other. Squinting into the distance, I saw a trail of oil refinery towers and smoking chimneys impale the night sky with burning flames. Beyond that, beyond the scrapyards, I saw corroded loading cranes topple back and forth, they turn their backs on us, and collapse in the dust, out there, in The Killing Fields.

The windows are misty.

Out there is a place, long gone. The fabric of the world is wet and heavy. I have fraying memories of the day we left, of what we left behind. Five days worth of thread. Night after night, it feels as though I did not see any of it with my own eyes.[2] I watched hotels, skyscrapers and pavements burning beyond the harbour lights, beyond the heavy sea. Even now, the sight, the sound, beyond the ash and sulphur, it comes back to me.

I know now, I know now what I didn't know then.

I know now, as salt and petrol burn thßrough the air. And, toing and froing out there, gliding down the dark passage, beneath the long grove, beneath the wet willowing, come the last of the lonely boatmen, marbling along the black grease of a sewering sea slimed over with crude oil.

They, the lonely boatmen, were once lighthouse keepers, from long before.

Moving further and further away, those boats, all seen together, begin to look like drifting little lantern cities, chiselling, waggling among the dead fish and rotting pigeons and oil spills, hundreds, maybe thousands of lonely boatmen, heaving, heaving, heaving families, heaving little pox-ridden bodies, little pox-ridden bodies shivering in hospital gowns. Those families carry no song on their backs. I saw broken down mothers seated, two hands folded on laps, breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out, reeled by the low tide, by the high tide. And fathers, close to tears, held their young dog-eared children under their arms, listened the whole night to their children, as their little teeth chattered against a sabbath chill. Their lips, their lips, the hushed colour of young lilac hungering. Some father's turned deaf. Some mothers turned blind.

Each child, chilled, charcoal eyes capsised,

---

1 This is a song by Zim Ngquwana, 'kubi emadodeni, siyagodola'

2 Late at night, in bed, when I could not sleep because I was scared of the dark, grandmother would whisper to me, 'close your eyes, so you can see'. In a later chapter, the reader will find grandmother smoking her pipe in the garden, standing there in the rain, and, with eyes closed, she will teach you about the light, and how to see in the dark. This takes time.

held up a bouquet of toolips,

Even now, even now, the fishermen stand and stare, the ones who once knew the sea, now watch, now welt, bending at the knee, on their wooden piers, with broken nets, with hooded eyes, with water in their ears.

* * * * *

The train travels down the main line, downward through the ribs of a tunnel, plunge down through a coastal fog, shunting all the way down, disappearing down the hole. As we passed through the tunnel the carriage lights above dim, then soon began flickering. Grandmother looks up, her eyebrows rose a little as she takes out a notebook and a pencil. We know not to ask questions. She spent a few quiet seconds scribbling in the smallest corner of her notebook on her lap, never taking her eyes off the paper, after a few seconds, she looks frightened. She scribbles with her pen, capturing the flickering, hands moving as fast as she could as the lights go on and off, the pattern is the train drivers' message hidden in plain sight. She waits, watches.

* * * * *

The whistle sounded.

Beside me, mother sits in her long blue shweshwe dress, and in her leather boots, muddied from rain. She wears two silver teardrop earrings, and her blue seanamarena was wrapped around her body and fastened with a pin across her chest. Behind her left ear, the two small cuts are still bleeding down her neck. Father sits, across from us, in his long black coat and well-pressed pants, camera hanging loose around his neck, reading a newspaper, in silence. He always reads newspapers backwards. And, head lilting over, he sees her neck, and, with jaws clenched, he very carefully folds his paper up to look her in the eye. Mother, looking back, chose not to turn her eyes away from him. And grandmother hands her a handkerchief. Eyes red, mother dabs at her neck and forehead and carries on eating her pineapple slice, pushing her glasses back up the ridge of her nose. My little brother, cheeks punctured by dimples, head on her thighs, opens his eyes and whispers to her: 'Are we there yet?'

The pressurised glass doors slid open, an old moustached vendor wheeled by, bow-tie crumpled beneath his wattle neck, glassy-eyes treading down the sooty blue carpet, down the dark, narrow corridor as an announcement on loudspeaker comes on: All passengers please standby for arrival

To my right, in the opposite aisle, three migrant children sit, hands turned up, dangling their feet. Slowly, bending forwards and backwards in their seats, drifting in and out the rhythm of sleep. I looked at the people around me, all of us alone, together. Among the jostling strangers asleep with mouths wide open, heads wobbling back and forth, a woman in her late twenties is watching me, back pushed up against her seat, with a reserved hand-drawn smile. She wore woolen stockings and high heels. I waved at her, and, in a moment of uncertainty, she tugged her skirt over her knees.

* * * * *

Behind me, two men are speaking.

One man called himself an escapee and the other an exile. Nobody would sit near them. After a while, I looked over my shoulder to pick up stompies and get a better look at the man with the corduroyed face, holding an umbrella between his knees, and his bearded friend with the torn shirt pocket twisting and folding his train ticket into a paper boat. On the other side, an old couple, a minister and his wife, sat frowning at them for making too much noise, holding their bags on their laps. The men drank a lot. They were sharing something out of a brown paper bag. They talked until late. I heard bits and pieces of their traded stories. They talked about of their homes, what they were forced to put behind them and what they hid in their carryovers. About what brought each of them to here, all this battered way. They shook their heads and asked each other if they'd heard the news about the pipelines and the death rattle of the last power plants, the weather, the whittled scaffolding and the mining ministry. And soon a loud playful argument breaks out between them over the true meaning behind the four airplanes and two trains that disappeared without a trace over the last few months.

* * * * *

Many of the passengers in the carriage sat cobbled together, fastening their seat belts, staring up, watching the news on the huge plasma TV screen revealing events taking place in the world outside, trying to make no noise, wiping tears from eyes, watching live aerial footage from helicopters. Father snapped his fingers at us, listen, look, pointed up in the direction of the newsreel on the screen.

And so came images of beached dolphins and whales, hundreds of penguins washed up on the black sand of the seashore, rotting. Then came the bursting banks of the Umgeni River, as taxis and buses were swept away by heavy rains, with toddlers trapped inside, crying and screaming. And we watched mothers paddling, clutching at the water, reaching out to save their children. There was footage from different countries, the village of Budrus, Kinshasha, Tokyo, Moscow, and Beirut, debris and coal dust bellying around mercury skyscrapers, creeping through streets and alleyways, blackening and burying petrol bombed cities beneath a dull, dark weight. It reminded me of mother, of all things. It reminded me of a poem that she read us years ago about a Smoke King slowly moving, towering towards something, lowering, hearsing over the land.

Everywhere, buildings went down as part of everyday life, the Playhouse Theater the gold domed mosque on Grey Street, Little Gujarat. There was the day-to-day footage of falling of monuments and statues splashed with paint, as in many other parts of the world, there were shouts, sirens, teams of masked cleaners in plastic suits and rubber boots, carrying stiff bristled brushes, scrubbing and hosing blood off the glass and granite of the buildings. There were shootings from Point Road to Marine Parade to the corner of Gillespie Street. Everything, in some way, reaches its limit. There is something dark and empty about the swaying swings at The Addington Children's Hospital. The wind that pushes the swings carries with it the sound of frightened children screaming, there are sounds trapped and kept alive inside the body of the hospital walls. Buildings speak. They tell stories about things going on inside, things we could not, or did not want to see.

There was footage of people taking matters into their own hands with the anvil and the cleaver, factory workers, traders, shopkeepers and up and down Victoria Market in shirts and jeans, carrying burning flag swings, spiked on a pole,whose daily lives burnt down little by little, along with the flag. We're afraid when close-up shots of silent protesters in balaclavas faded in, protesters gathered in all major city centers around the world, and carried signs which read: Save the planet. Kill yourself

Up, on a hill, near the clouds, the Memorial Tower is extinguished to give to shape to a darker light of remembrance. No traces of the execution, the ceasefire, the closed fist over the lever, and the opening bell. The last shake of a tambourine and the carnival clown, chasing his head down

West Street. Again and again, from one day to the next, we saw architects and authors in handcuffed, bound, hands stretched out, shot to death by a firing-squads.

There are no words.

There are only bare, uncaptioned images of cracked window panes and large gashes ripping through streets and scarring the concrete flesh of housing projects, monuments and statues torn down, cities falling softly to their knees and then, a 3D map full of small red 'hotspots' emerged on the screen, by the hundreds, signalling which areas the children had already appeared in. Underground reporters arguing back and forth:

'Look, we've always known that we are being subjected to global experiments.'

'I disagree Lance, honestly, I have to disagree. You're misleading the public, and what's worse is that you're engaging in a culture of competitive victimhood and –'

'Oh, come on Khanyi - '

'Lance, do you want to publicly deny that there is a global social arrangement?'

'Arrangement?

'Yes.'

'Khanyi, iow you sound like a conspiracy theorist.'

'There is no global 'we'. You know it. I know it. The viewers know it. The global 'we' is not being subjected to experimentation. It's Africa that's always been the preferred testing ground for...

rap 34

BY LESEGO RAMPOLOKENG

humanity has been hanged
for treason

when it hammered tyranny to
reason

I became a bullet fired from a
gun in the bush where less is
said than done

thus I emerge from a rhyme
of hunger

making the rhythm of anger
I remember

they dismembered dulcie
september

without ruth they invested In
the death of the truth of ruth
first

through the fallen leaves of
our lives I hear the pitter-
patter beat

of the hectic heart of
hector petersen

prophetic after poetic stanza

rolled before it was ripped
from stanza bopape

dexterous in the making of
liquid pain & bloody rain

putrid brains liquidated david
webster

from the muddy brown
waters of this time fishers of
man

fished out braam fischer

the zombie crew
drew andrew zondo to hondo

yellow-livered fire from the
tummy of hell
made me yell
when it fell on thami mnyele

unbounded though hounded
unvanquished & angered

victory bound i march
brave from the grave of
victoria mxenge

for no actor not even an
oscar-getter
can capture
let alone better
their rapture
when they fracture &
puncture oscar mpetha

this vulture
on my culture
has long begun to tamper
with my temper

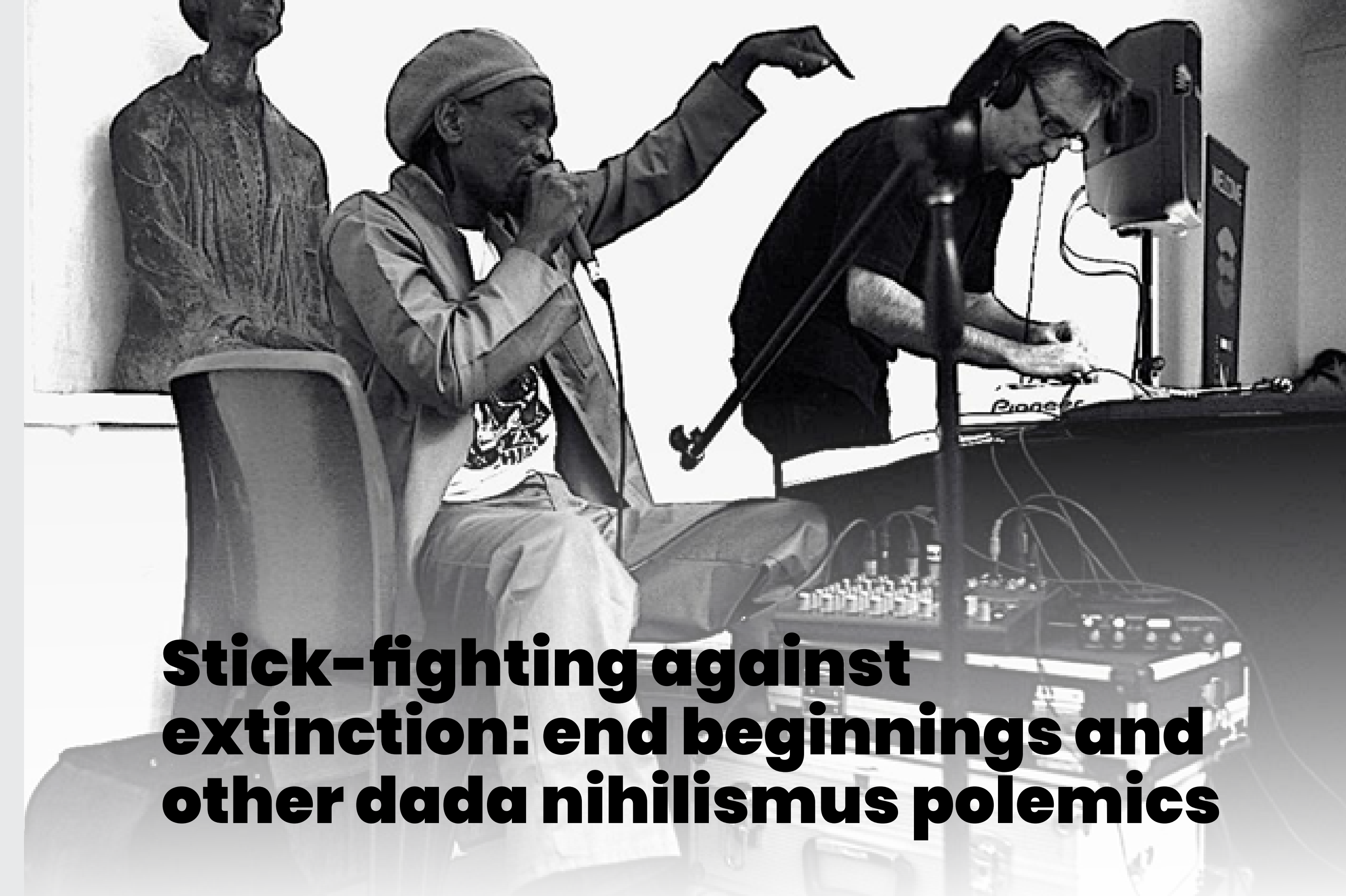
but my wit
will not quit
cracking the whip
until I reap
the vast richness
of my inheritence

in this moment of my torment

I raise my mumble
of a grumble to a rumble see
them stumble
tumble & crumble

for i went to kliptown
oppression tattered &
came away freedom
chartered

with an electric charge in my
voice & the bullet-speaking
bush emergent boys



Stick-fighting against extinction: end beginnings and other dada nihilismus polemics

WORDS **WARRICK SONY** IMAGE **ALEXIA WEBSTER**

FOREGROUND

"…a rather undernourished, slightly pock-marked, very tall and thin writer…"

On the 13th of October 2009 an exhibition titled "Dada South? Experimentation, Radicalism and Resistance" opened at the Iziko South African National Gallery in the centre of Cape Town.

A few of my early collages and record covers from the 1980s were on display, and I'd also agreed to team up with Lesego Rampolokeng to do a few of our more experimental performance pieces. Lesego was also to present an opening speech and I took advantage of his visit to synchronise some new recording work at my nearby studio. After the opening, a number of people milled around with glasses of wine and snacks, some sitting on the lawn under the clear, warm, summer sky. Tourists wondered in to see what the occasion was. Lesego and I were talking to a couple from Gauteng; friends of his who had come to the Cape for a summer holiday. Standing behind us was my 14-year-old son, Noah, and his school-friend, Ren. They had been comparing smart phones when suddenly Noah started agitating and pressuring us to leave. We said our farewells and moved off from the gallery, walking along the paved walkway in front of the planetarium and down to the road to where the car was parked under spreading Oak trees.

As we reached the road Ren said, "Hey bru I'm just coming down!" Noah's voice behind me said, "Don't turn around, Dad, keep walking— we've just been mugged—they're watching us." Lesego spun around, "What? Where? Show

me." I remember him telling me that he was once a dab hand with an Okapi, the ubiquitous wooden handled, lock-back knife favoured by gangsters. Long after the incident Lesego told me that he if an altercation had taken place then; he would have been the last man standing.

I thought it better to get us all into the car and leave. As I turned on the ignition a rush of white noise, like the sound of the sea filled my car. It was from a CD we were discussing when I had parked. Given to me by a new age healer, it purported to be the sonic healing frequencies of the Swine Flu (H1N1) that, then, was infecting people from across the globe. Apparently, playing the CD would boost the immune system making it less likely to contract the virus. We were discussing the feasibility of hiding the sound in one of our tracks; a sort of dada-esque absurdity.

As we drove, the boys told us the story. A tall, thin, shirtless man in his late twenties, came up to them brandishing a knife, his T-Shirt stuffed into the back of his track-suit pants, like a tail. He told them to hand over their phones and said, according to Noah. "Don' make me do things I don' wanna do." His accomplice, an older man who hovered in the background said, more relaxedly,"just do as he says." Ren asked if he could at least keep his SIM card. They agreed and let him remove it and then strolled over, with the prize, to sit on a nearby wall. "We're watching you." was indicated with a hand/ finger signal. The white-middle-class nerd in me wondered what Lesego would have done if I'd let his anger give vent to violence. The violence in his work fascinated me and I suspected was a constant silent presence throughout his life. Did he still travel in the company of the Okapi? Was he still up to speed?

Lesego grew up, toughened by the abuses fostered in the apartheid townships. In an interview for, the magazine, "Counterpunch" he said "I grew up watching my mother get her face split under the fists and boots of a multitude of men, who … were pushed on to expend whatever excess anger, energy, fury-fuelled by their own emasculation they had left, on me. I carry the scars on my back, face, body as a reminder. anyway … I am here. what more do you want to know?"

I visited his family home once in Orlando in the early 1990s and met his step-father who told me that he had sold cannabis to put "that boy" through university. Rampolokeng senior, rather disparagingly, complained about his son's choice of career. The man had emerged, affable and confident, from a smoke-filled, rusted shell of a wheel-less 1970s Austen 1100 which was propped up on bricks. It was a kind of smoking-room where he and two friends were passing the day. I was reminded of the LP cover, by the reggae artist U-Roy where clouds of marijuana smoke obscured the portrait photograph.

MIDDLEGROUND

The "Dada South?" exhibition at the National Gallery "presented artworks of South African artists from the 1960s to the present day, in conjunction with some of the most monumental Dada artworks from the early-twentieth century." This was a fitting place for Lesego to have his word-art acknowledged. He embraced the anti-art spirit of Dada "with his opening speech and his comment on actually being disgusted to open an exhibition in an art institution…" In his railing against "Art" he shared common ground with the Dadaists. These sentiments are echoed in the frequent substitution of the word 'fart' for 'art' which is prevalent in much of his writing.

& then of course the Farts Minister had a lot of broken hot wind to blow about how great Gwala
was & that they'd been in negotiation to put him
in the education-stream. Lies & bullshit. Faecalfaced
Friends.
poetry-hoboes &
literary-tramps
not with fart-critics,
gossip-colonists or glory-whores
in power's corridors
nor detractor-farmers
with their tractors in my mind field
I'm more the Jesus with
a crown of thoughts.

The early Dadaists were forged from the trenches of World War I and set their rage-against-the machine-words to the stage at the "Cabaret Voltaire." Lesego was forged in the trenches of the apartheid ghetto and dug his way out with his pen and his Okapi. His first book "*Horns for Hondo*" (1990) announces that he is a "rapmaster supreme word-bomber in the extreme" (Rap 31) and that "the word endures forever" (Rap 11). In the foreword to "Dada: art and anti-art" (1968) Hans Richter recounts the parting words of Tristan Tzara, "Don't forget that polemics always played a big part in Dada. The polemical was an important weapon for the Dadaists in the destruction of the status quo. "Hugo Ball's words delivered to the first Dada soiree in 1916 at the "Cabaret Voltaire" in Zurich declares the polemic in literary terms similar to Lesego's own:

A line of poetry is a chance to get rid of all the filth that clings to this accursed language, as if put there by stockbrokers' hands, hands worn smooth by coins. I want the word where it ends and begins. Dada is the heart of words.

The etymology of "polemic" is perfectly descriptive of Lesego's oeuvre: "pertaining to controversy", or, from Greek polemikos: "warlike, belligerent, stirring up hostility." The "word-bomber in the extreme." He is concerned with politics, greed, and the interplay of violence and religion; as Christo Doherty points out in his 1993 review of "*Horns for Hondo*" (1990):

[I]t is apparent that Rampolokeng is not in any obvious sense of the word, a "political" poet. His vision is too apocalyptic; his imagery is too overwhelmingly biblical, and even the references to the political lexicon of revolution, imperialism and capitalism are subsumed within strongly religious connotations[.]

The album "*End Beginnings*" was released on cassette in 1992; a post-script to the noise of the dying apartheid beast. Most of the poems came from "*Horns for Hondo*" (1990. though a few were taken from "*Talking Rain*" (1993) published a year later. "*Talking Rain*" (1993) provided more material for a second album which we half-finished but much of it has since been lost between the change from analogue to digital formats. Strange tape based digital machines in the interim allowed non-linear editing as well as non-linear ways of archiving. One of the tracks that was completed, however, was "*Johannesburg*" (1995) which rages against the brutality of the city "where dreams come to die" existing, merely "to keep the money belt spinning." We recorded the poem to a bass guitar groove I had built around a drum-loop with a guitar track played by Louis Mhlanga. A rework of this appears on the "*Bantu Rejex*" (2018) album released online. This version plays with a more electro-dub production with the added sound/design element of a Sowetan coal seller calling his horse whilst riding through the streets.

The poem *End Beginnings,* which closes the "*Horns for Hondo*" book was, for me one of the most surreal of Lesego's works. It captures in an, almost, tableau vivant, the essence of dadaist/ surrealist word imagery: "archangel Gabriel still-born choked by a condom … Shaka was a cannibal & the pope had abortions for supper" (95). The slow-motion videos of Zimbabwean artist Kudzanai Chiurai come to mind, especially his Iyeza (2011) in which he re-creates "The Last Supper" as a historic and surrealist framing device. Similarly, it is tempting to link Lesego's work to the Surrealist movement which, from its genesis, had strong connections to Africa ,as suggested by Franklin Rosemount,

surrealism is the only major modern cultural movement of European origin in which men and women of African descent have long participated as equals, and in considerable numbers …. African influence on the founders of surrealism was evident even before they called themselves surrealists — that is, before the formation of the movement in 1924.

The surrealists evolved from, and, according to Richter were " a weapon to destroy" Dada. They were interested in the workings of the subconscious, and the intersection of "dreams and chance carried to the point of hallucination." and it is here that Lesego's work fits, more clearly, the pragmatic of Dadaism. His writing is an art that takes a hammer to realism and re-shapes it. Strongly auto-biographical,

he practices a story telling that is often jagged and un-believable but never fantastical.

"*End Beginnings*" came out in the same year as Vusi Mahlasela's, album, "*When You Come Back*" (1992) also through Shifty Records. He was an old friend of Lesego's from their days at the "Congress Of South African Writers" (COSAW). Keith Lister of BMG-AFRICA loved Mahlasela's album to such an extent that he bought a half share in the record company—henceforth called Shifty-BMG. And so, without really listening to what they'd purchased BMG's marketing department suddenly had to figure out what to do with Lesego's album. They had no experience in marketing a record that set out clearly from the start to avoid radio play and had lyrics that suggested that Jesus had died from masturbation. It was released as a limited cassette. The avant/art music label, Recommended Records in the UK thought better of it and released it on compact disc (CD) with a beautiful booklet containing all Lesego's words as well as a series of photos from a William Kentridge's movie: "*Johannesburg: 2nd Greatest City after Paris*" (1991). I had been working on the sound design and music for the film and Kentridge kindly let us use selected images. Later, both Lesego and I worked on the Kentridge/Handspring Puppets theatre production, "Faustus in Africa." (1995)

After the ANC took power and elbowed out the UDF, Lesego became belligerent about how corrupt and untrustworthy the core leadership had become. His anger with Cyril Ramaphosa—who had removed him from the performers list of a cultural event—still simmers to this day. Despite their protestations the ANC had little time for the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and their poets. Much of the BCM leadership had been decimated by apartheid police, spies and hit squads and their position was further weakened by the international support for the ANC who were seen as the only real opposition to the apartheid governmnent. Consequently, the academic literature of this generation of poets is scant. Lesego is currently chipping away at the nescience with his PhD research on Mafika Gwala, but more biographical work is essential, especially on the likes of Ingoapele Madingoane, Lefifi Tladi and the Medupe and Dashiki initiatives. In "Bird Monk Seding" (2017) Bavino Sekete the protagonist, says that Ingoapele "died with an axe in his skull, sitting on a toilet" —— one of the most shocking images I have ingested from the book. I tried to find out more on this, aware that the novel skirts a thin veil between fact and fiction. The two or three articles I found on Madingoane's death stated that the poet had "died after a long illness" but I have come across no biographies or other information on the man despite numerous emails and extensive academic on-line searches. I remain corrected here of course but until then I trust my source and Lesego hangs in there in with Bavino on this. In an interview with the *Mail and Guardian* regarding the overlooked poets—the missing voices of our time—he said:

Of all the poets … you can throw in Ingoapele Madingoane — and please mention this — he died with an axe in his skull. He had been abandoned by all these Black Consciousness comrades who bought into BEE [black economic empowerment] bullshit, into this coffee creamer crap. He died with an axe in his skull. Nobody cared for him.

He also draws a line between the BCM poets and the UDF/ ANC torch bearers; "The bring-on-the-poet-to-lick-the-stage-clean-for-the-politicians thing." A very real critique of the problem for the artist when aligning to a political movement: "The revolution will devour its children." Returning to Ingoepele; Bavino Sekete, in *Bird-Monk Seding* says:

[He] was a lonely man. His BC comrades would have nothing to do with him. But at his memorial the whole blasted fat-piglet lot of them came out spouting platitudes. Friends. Peter Makurube died of malnutrition and neglect after all the years he put into the arts of poetry & music. He was persona-non-grata to all besuited over-flabby frames & business spots. Memorial & funeral what happened, all the rats came out screaming praises. Friends. Mafika Gwala died torn up, soul cut to pieces but spirit still flying high with defiance & and unchanged, solid belief in what he stood for, a world beyond the grasping, clasping, clawed existence some sold on the stock exchange.

When the ANC exiles returned they took preference over UDF locals, many had come from successful careers in the music and performing arts worlds of Europe and America, a split that is evident even as I write.

In 1994, amongst all this, Lesego and I were invited to Brazil to play some concerts in Belo Horizonte, their second largest city. It was a poetry festival.

We were interviewed by a journalist from São Paulo, the day before the opening (26 de agosto de 1994) and disagreed, much to the surprise of the Brazilian, over the concept of "The New South Africa." The Hunt Lascaris advertising agency was employed by the Mandela government to sell optimistic promises of a better life which I thought was necessary to avoid violence and bloodshed. Lesego disagreed.. The bright new flag and happy rugby team was derided by him as window dressing, masking anger, fury and a corrupt and inept ANC who had not shown any interest in artists—non-partisan, free thinking, philosopher poets—like himself. "*Talking Rain*" prophetically ranted against the new order.

now the horse is out of the stable
the worm's eaten the bird
time's gone mad
the fowl's seen the dog dead
the deranged slave runs the whole range
of fables of change
it's boiling the mind
it tumbles in the gut[.]

"The Last Bribe" uses the metaphorical selling out of Christ for a few shekels:

the last cry on golgotha
rent the veil
coins fell into empty hands
a cold focus beyond reach
of warmth
an unutterable meaning
the phrasing of twilight's
deep tenderness
a return to the earth
from the stars
shattered in realization

In more recent writings, Lesego's polemic against the ruling dis-order nails his colours less obtusely. The first poem in the collection "Head on Fire" (2012), "*Orlando Cockroach Chronicles*", shoots from the hip (I quote in fragments to illustrate my point):

the struggle house a museum
'buy a piece of struggle-dream'
where once mothers marched …
the leaders house stands behind
hope-high walls, eyes fall on
electric fence and surveillance
cameras while next door old
blind woman bends
under disability's years weight of
rape & robbery recipient the
grant (11)

In the end it was the word and the word was the beginning. "*End Beginnings*" (1992) underscores the influence of Lesego's Catholic Church background. The coupling of end and beginning, though biblical, also alludes to Madingoane's 1976 poem Africa my beginning, Africa my ending. Baptised at the Regina Mundi Catholic Church in Soweto, Lesego has said that it was there that he encountered black consciousness. Religion and politics are always good bed-fellows. The book of Revelations is re-purposed in "*Endbeginnings*" and is a frightening, afro-surrealist vaticination, a foretelling of the future, of the world we now occupy. Beginning with the lines,

"cock crows & owl goes to sleep..
kings sprout where slaves take
root.. apocalypse is genesis.. sun a
black glob of ice spurts Impotence
into earth's barren womb."

It twists through an object landscape of Catholic iconography and ends with the lines,

"the weakest inherit the earth…
truth is treason now liars rule
the world."

With the recorded version and in terms of sound-design, this was one of my first real encounters with the digital technology which had started to influence sound processing during the late 1980s. The sounds captured were digitised into one of the first user-friendly sampling devices on the market. I was able to process: found voices, radio snippets and recordings made in the field' These are deployed as a chorus between the recitation.

The "*End Beginnings*" track starts with the sound of BETAMAX machine fast

forwarding to the words "welcome to the program" and then shuttling to the word "peace" where a loop of a sampled bow and atmospheric-pad holds a tonal centre, over which Lesego recites. A counter chorus made from a treated voice puts the Afrikaans words "Ja/Nee" into the mix. Excerpts from an interview recorded with Pik Botha cut in and out with lines like "I'm interested in the future" and "we can make a list of the wrongs of the past" , which are interrupted by right-wing AWB chants and audio scrubbing from a video. The piece ends with a jolly radio-ad excerpt of a group of white South Africans singing

> *"You just can't beat a braai" and Mandela's voice saying "Go back to School."*

Once again it is tempting to place compositions like this and indeed Lesego's whole oeuvre into the, fashionable, Afro-futurist genre, his writing is too dark and too gothic to be aligned with what Kodwo Eshun describes as

> *"engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present."*

Lesego is far more punk — where punk is synonymous with Dadaism— he is his own genre: Afro-dadaism perhaps, or what Le Roi Jones (aka: Amiri Baraka) called "the Black Dada Nihilismus" (1964), "minds packed in straw." As in the case of Dambudzo Marachera's work; Christian iconography pulls the work from free association into social realism, where absurdism and nonsensical wordplay is replaced by the sub-realist theology of sufferance which, after all, is the bedrock of the Christian faith. Especially in his later works Lesego's catholic veil is a backdrop to the theatre of an extraordinarily violent life. He often employs a prophetic voice to deliver messages of stinging rebuke and post-capitalist gore. Doherty, again, picks up on this:

> *Rampolokeng displays an Old Testament awareness of the complexities in the role of poet-prophet. Although he describes himself as 'my people's transmitter' Rampolokeng is aware that the public poet in times of darkness is both a Moses urging his people forward and an Isaiah condemning falsehood wherever it may be discerned. Rampolokeng explores the antimonies of the role: at several points he imagines himself floating above the pain and despair like one of Blake's prophets*

On 1st May 2013 Lesego posted this to Facebook:

> *"Four poems by Dambudzo Marechera*
> *The Bar-Stool Edible Worm"*

Dambudzo Marachera—the product of an Anglican education—was writing with a punk/nihilistic attitude similar to Lesego's. His polemical Bar-Stool Edible Worm has the lines: "I am against everything /Against war and those against War. /Against whatever diminishes/ The individuals blind impulse." There is a careless existentialism here, that even echoes—though more intelligently— the Sex Pistols' Anarchy in the UK (1976) , "I don't know what I want but I know how to get it/ I wanna destroy the passerby." The fight against everything is also captured in Lesego's "we're stick-fighting against extinction." Here we have the nub of the "black dada nihilismus"; he is fighting against "the state or fact of being rendered nonexistent, physically unsound, or useless"

Joanna Wright (2004) uses the word "syncretism" as a vehicle to explain Lesego's political non-alignment strategy in his "resistance" writing. She says he "appropriates the speaking position, social space and function of the praise poet, not aesthetically, but in terms of function and intention [and]… also uses this rhetorical space to criticize authority." I would be more inclined to suggest that the syncretic, as used in its Greek etymological root—a uniting against a third force—is the presence of the church throughout almost all of his work. The, so-called, "resistance" then, is a resistance to the father figure; God the father (or the god-father) who brought down violence and fury upon person and family. If syncretism is the "attempted reconciliation or union of irreconcilable principles" then both Dambudzo and Lesego are wrestling with the three fold violences perpetuated upon them by: the church, the state and the family. " I answered in the language of stone" said Lesego; stick-fighting metaphorically; twisting, turning, break my bones — and the words that never hurt.

Lesego's Facebook post pointed me to Dambudzo Marachera's work and like many of his other recommendations I have been enriched by these. His reading is so wide that he can draw from Aimé Césaire, to Herman Charles Bosman in a single conversational thread. Because I had an LP with the same title—though unrelated thematically—he suggested I read Amos Tutuola's "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts" (1954) which he thought was the authors best work. I also read "The Palm Wine Drinkard" (1952) as a result. Tutuola's spirit-worlds, word-pictures are surreal, and visual, and seem to spring from a similar syncretism: the African (Igbo) and Anglican religious imagery and folkore. Even though his characters occupy a ghostly realm beyond death; the real sense of darkness, a terrifying gothic darkness, seems to come from a casual disregard for death.

It is the veil that W.E.B Du Bois writes about in The Souls of Black Folk (1909). The veil that "black folk" slip behind, separating them from whites, and return to from time to time; for Tutuola, it is the veil of life and death. I sense that this veil is born from a similar almost casual, violence prevalent in Lesego's work; his, a wrestling with the symptomatic of the South African psyche; a different beast, though equally biblical, and still "slouching to Bethlehem." Lesego touches on the brutality of his childhood experiences—which I feel is key to understanding his writing— in an interview with Robert Berold and Stacy Hardy, when asked about the scatalogical references in his work he said:

> *I don't know if you have encountered children who have been raped, who have been sexually violated, I'm speaking about kids specifically, to the extent where they don't seem to have any control over their bowel movements. And I am not talking about infants; it could be a teenager. They just sit there and the next thing you know, there is faecal matter there and urination going on. I think that that continues their entire lives. I've seen that, it's part of my reality. I present that without sanitising it.*

BACKGROUND

"You have to revisit your past to be able to move ahead" Geoff Mphakati

Lesego was one of a number of poets working in the, so-called, praise/struggle poetry idiom who found refuge within COSAW, an umbrella organisation affiliated to the United Democratic Front (UDF). Many of these young people were influenced by the extraordinary energy of the poetic outpouring of the previous generation of "*Staffrider*" writers and poets.

> *In contrast to the intimidation, apathy, stagnation, and pessimism that set in after Sharpeville in 1960, the Soweto uprising of 1976 was followed by one of the biggest literary outbursts South Africa has known, an outburst of literary and other cultural activity which marked the climax of the Black Consciousness era. In defiance of the government's efforts to suppress black cultural and political expression, many cultural groups of Black Consciousness persuasion emerged after Soweto. (1988.3)*

Transported by the charisma of the BCM poets such as Ingoapele Madingoane, Lefifi Tladi and others who were "putting the word to the sound of the drum."

> *…not long after things exploded in Soweto, people like Ingoapele Madingoane and all the other groups, Medupe and Dashiki and Lefifi Tladi, started taking to the ghetto streets themselves. I was dragged to some of these and then later I went of my own accord. Their work had a very high impact that was quite different to what I was getting at school.*

A shift happened in South Africa after the 1976 Soweto uprising due to the introduction of television a few months later. A more sophisticated propaganda war was to be fought by a government often ham-strung by religious conservatives. Television was seen as a golden propaganda opportunity and a way of countering the lo-fi broadcasts of the liberation movement's Radio Freedom. The first TV broadcasts, however were way off target. They totally ignored the Soweto uprising and, ironically,

played a kind of fake news item for children using felt "Sesame Street" type puppet presenters who read out nonsense news items in English and Afrikaans; a bizarre Dadaist moment if ever there was one.

Secondly a global revolution in music happened in 1976. Initially labelled "punk" or "punk-rock" in Western Europe, the UK and America. This movement morphed into a dada/punk do-it-yourself youth rebellion which, Tim Mohr (2018), convincingly argues, brought down the Berlin Wall. Musically, the post-punk era embraced art, noise and reggae — particularly the afro-futurist dub music—production techniques from the studios of Kingston, Jamaica. This shook the foundation of the megalithic capitalist music industry creating a generation gap as wide as that during the Vietnam conflict era and heralded an attention to political content, world class struggles and the Cold War divide. British punk band "the Crass" (1979) shouted "do they owe us a living, course they do, course they fucking do" a lyric which could go down well in many major COVID-19 hit cities today. Punk was a soapbox on which to vent and rage. Putting words to the drum. Words that were conspicuously "concerned" and socially conscious; this overrode ostentatious musical proficiency. Reggae and punk existed in unison in the UK; both politically charged genre's of the late 1970s and both inspired by an outsider do-it-yourself-ethic, fuelled by Japanese technology which made it possible for the amateur to own the means of production.

Big studios and record companies received the first of the body blows that would eventually lead to their demise with the advent of digital music production and distribution. (Today music is inextricably linked to video and almost unrecognisable as a stand-alone consumer product) By the 1980s home recording studios proliferated and the ability to record, manufacture and distribute radical, un-censored music and words was accessible to middle budget entrepreneurs. Lloyd Ross set up the Shifty mobile studio in this spirit and I accompanied him to Lesotho to record the first African-post-punk album by the (then) three piece band "Sankomota" (1984).

Two years later Ross completed "Change is Pain" an album for the poet Mzwakhe Mbuli who had grown in popularity appearing at UDF rally's and cultural events. To get the timing of the voice and music right Ross had to splice the voice recordings into the music that was composed in workshopped sessions with Jito Baloi, Ian Herman and Morri Uarti; all session players from other Shifty albums. Pressing vinyl initially wasn't an option because of political interference at the pressing plant so, to avoid a banning order, "Change is Pain" existed as a white labelled cassette with the word "Pete" written on in marker pen. We connected ten cassette recorders together and ran off copies throughout the day in our kitchen. The album preceded "Before Dawn" (1989), Mbuli's best-selling book published by the Congress of African Writers (COSAW). He became a huge star in South Africa but entangled himself in a myriad of personal problems; not least of which was a bizarre bank robbery in 1997 for which he served 6 years of an initial 13 year prison sentence. An extremely harsh and controversial sentence. Lesego, admiringly, commented in a June 1999 interview with Robert Berold:

It doesn't matter whether you liked his work or thought his stuff was 'work', he opened a crack in the literary structure and occupied it. And for that he gets my respect. The old goats that gloat at him today are the ones who lifted him high yesterday. Bad roll of the dice. The mass democratic movement propped him up once, and then what? He dropped. So everyone runs around cackling away in their little farticles. I say biggup to him, and flash my lighter in the direction of the dynamite up the wrinkled butts in Parliament.

Initially, because of my interest in dub music and the success of the dub-poet, Linton Kwesi Johnson, I was mooted to record Mzwakhe's album but felt that his writing was too politically compliant. Consequently the idea to work with a similar Dub poet was very attractive. Lesego was introduced to me through a friend at COSAW and I thought his work was sophisticated and hard hitting. I had not seen anything comparable in our country. In fact Lesego's work has been deeply educational for me. In 1989 when I recorded the lines "... planting seeds of babylon/ humanity razes them with the fire of frantz fanon/ the god of death has chosen this nation" I had no idea who Franz Fanon was. Over the years I have developed growing respect and familiarity with key writers in the canon of black intellectual writing and have learned much through productive inquiry into Lesego's core influences. My fields of reference, when first encountering Lesego's work (apart from Linton Kwesi Johnson), were mostly music composers who embraced poetry/lyrics as a content provider in their work.

One of the first pieces we completed was a track titled "Heavyweight" from Horns for Hondo (1990). Like the dub masters, I relied heavily on technology to produce my music, working alone mostly during the studios downtime. Consequently much of my music was looped based, rhythm section ideas—what Jamaican producers called the RIDDIM—grooves of drum and bass which I played myself. This was before the ubiquity of computers so the loop had to be played in real time. I would often lay down four minutes of drums and then lay a bass guitar and build from there. Early samplers and synthesisers were deployed on the "End Beginnings" album particularly on the title track and "*Heavyweight*." So "putting the words to the sound of the drum", as Lesego said, was a natural progression when adopting the dub/poetry process. The Dub concept came out of the instrumental B-Side remixes of Jamaican hit songs that were played for members of the audience to freestyle their own words over; a rap style known as "toasting." "*Heavyweight*" spoke of rioting (the language of stone) and the muting of communications (the freezing of the drum) with a historical context thrown in by the use of the word "rum." The trope of the rum guzzling pirate frames the poem and complemented, coincidentally, my own writing. Told from the pirates point of view the track "*Europeans*" (1985) states that, "We come from across the sea in wooden ships - our scurvy eyes scour this new land" "*Heavyweight*" would then be the answer of the colonised ,

They come in the heat of rum /
To freeze the beat of my drum
Oh people take note / I wasn't allowed to vote
They sang a song / sharp as the devils prong
They spoke in the gun and rifle tone / I answered in the language of stone

(Track 1 on End Beginnings)

In "Heavyweight" I employed a dark two note synth-bass line over a Roland CompuRhythm drum machine groove playing at a slow tempo of 85 beats per minute (BPM). This was interspersed by a string sounds and atmospheres from our, then cutting edge, sound sampling keyboard. The last stanza of the poem "my words are sacred honey / cannot be bought with blood money" are crucial to Lesego's craft. Throughout the hardship and poverty of the poet, he has never compromised. I, in the early 1990s, with two small children at home, dipped my hand into the honey jar of television commercials and one of the first I worked on was Mzwakhe's voice-over for the Cremora Coffee campaign. "Roar Young Lions and wake up to the great taste of Cremora in your coffee in the morning." I used to joke with Lesego that it was time to sell out, get some cash, and build a future. This was before "the ungovernable" future closed in on us. In the same year that Mzwakhe was arrested for bank robbery I was shot through the leg in a hijacking. "I became a bullet fired from a gun" to quote another Lesego line (Rap34). The violence in South Africa had reached out to touch my life too.

Trying to luv you, S.A. you are just making yourself so totally unlovable. always have. & I'm just your son, prodigal or not, trying to come home. with a bag of books, music & art the Sasol 3 were traded for...& the guerilla-poet Solomon Mahlangu wrote his will in his own blood when Goch street was not far from Russia. Mayakovsky was there.

Vladimir Mayakovsky's complex relationship with the Soviet state began with his admiration of V.I. Lenin who, when in exile in Zurich, had sleepless nights from the noise coming across from Hugo Ball's "Cabaret Voltaire" which was directly opposite his lodgings. Hans Richter had seen Lenin and Zinoviev

in the library several times. "It seemed to me that the Swiss authorities were much more suspicious of the Dadaists.. than these quiet studious Russians ...even though the latter were planning a world revolution and later astonished the authorities by carrying it out."

If, as Mayakovsky said, "Art is not a mirror to hold up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it." then Lesego's genius is to resist art, deflect the hammer blows and hold the mirror up high.

WARRICK SONY is a South African music and sound specialist who has worked, on a range of films, documentaries, art events, theatre, dance, and project albums. He is the creator of the Kalahari Surfers, possibly South Africa's first virtual band, based at Shifty Studios in Joburg from 1983 onwards. A prolific output of politically radical albums from 1984 onwards garnered attention from the state and various bannings and silencing's ensured. Consequent attention in Europe and the UK saw the release, there, of his albums and the organisation of various live concerts and tours. Sony and the Surfers played concerts in Soviet era Russia and East Germany. In 1994 he teamed up with Dub poet Lesego Rampolokeng for an album and a tour in Brazil.

During the 90s he produced albums for Sony, Shifty-BMG and African Dope Records and worked running the ShiftyBMG Music label, mostly concentrating on developing and promoting foreign African music in South Africa. He toured with his band, Transsky, who opened for the Massive Attack tour of South Africa (1999) and engineered the Brian Eno workshops at the Baxter Theatre in 1998.

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* Related music Spotify playlist: https://open.spotify.com/1FtB761JrUGPBoxn9qDdJE?s i=ul2RN3S0SAWrYNM95hKRKw

Truth is in the vomit

BY XITHA MAKGETHA

I'm stuck on a typewriter

Literary critic! I'm not the right (write) type

I brew a storm in a three legged pot

Village vibes got my pen screeching rural thought

And granny bomb graffiti with cow dung

I stitch my tongue back in my mouth

Bushveldt river bank free verse deposit

Breathing's hard with a smoke necklace

Bantustan episodes of Biko's ghost is Frank Talk

Kids fall in pit toilets and drown in faeces

Shock pumping like a communal water tap

Bring a bucket

Village tranquillity so moving it makes stomachs turn

And the truth is in the vomit.

XITHA MAKGETA is a South African, Pretoria-based writer, performer and art activist. He is the author of a poetry chapbook titled *Bits & Pieces*. He's the founder and facilitator of the WriteUsAnonymous Poetry Program running at the Stanza Bopape Library in Mamelodi. He has toured and performed on different stages locally and internationally including, Split This Rock Poetry Festival (USA), Harare Literary Festival (Zim), UNISA Languages Festival.

The sherried noon

BY BUSUKU

The birds of the sea arrive in the red distance. I lie down to sleep on the fresh sheets of the bed, watch them, out there, through the window, shrieking, circling, round and round, too many to count. I am told, what is written on the sky, for those who can read, will not let go.

It's late.

The house creaks and folds its dark wings in for the night. The curtains stir, quiet, always, so quiet. Out here, in this old town of candle-lit houses, the season, risen, is poorer. I can't sleep here, in this room, in this house, hemmed in these threading hours that slowly fray. And again tonight, little by little, the hands of the children playing outside pulley the reddened moon and her sister into the sky.

I listen, bent and salty eyed.

Three times, I hear the quiet sound of bicycle bells ringing outside. Over time, the dirty weather thickens, and the air, beaten black by smoke, maroons the sherried noon in ash from winter fires. It's cold. A mist comes in from outside of town, from all around, from every side. And, laying here, pillowed, I can smell something in the air, rising in the distance as the night weeps out, something from far, far, faraway, far afield, from the wintering grounds. There is a cold ash, rough and no longer sung about, that thistles over the polished darkness of our room.

BUSUKU is an award-winning poet from Durban. She is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Cape Town. Having been awarded a doctoral scholarship by the Graduate School for Arts and Social Sciences, she is currently reading for a PhD at Stellenbosch University. Busuku served as the Interview Editor of New Contrast: The South African Literary Journal. She has published various poems and short stories in local and international poetry journals such as New Coin, New Contrast, Prufrock, Ons Klyntji, Aerodrome, Sol Plaatje European Union Anthology, Illuminations and Five Points.

'It takes a ripple to make a storm': A reflection on Lesego Rampolokeng's poetry

WORDS **PHEHELLO J MOFOKENG** IMAGE **ORIGINAL COVER IMAGE, COSAW**

To listen to Lesego Rampolokeng's poetry is to experience the blunt brutality of the truth, beautiful pain of excellent lyricism and to undergo the most excruciating catharsis. Papa Ramps to many, Rampolokeng is truly a 'rap master supreme.' His work jaywalks the pavements of politics, it pulls hard at the strings of the literary 'establishment' and it is the wrecking ball against high-browed academism that sneaks itself into every fibre of society.

Let me declare my love for Lesego Rampolokeng's work right from the onset. I have been enthralled to the poetry of Rampolokeng from the first line I read.

1998. Wits University. Africana Library. I went down a rabbit hole of reading things that interested me; not what had been prescribed. *Horns for Hondo* was in the non-loan section of the library and I do not even remember how I requested or came across the book. I went to a random page on *Horns* – and I did not – could not put it down. Rampolokeng had composed the entire text in rhyme schemes of rap. It was ingenious, intelligent and rational rhymes – not the gimmicky superficial type that make you cringe.

I had already heard another classic Rampolokeng's poem - by chance - on TV.

> *black gods were dead &*
> *archangel gabriel still-born*
> *choked by condom/*
> *shaka was cannibal & the pope*
> *had abortions for supper/*
> *black tits & bums of a nation of*
> *strippers & exhibitionists made*
> *Jesus die of masturbation/*

I am Catholic and hearing that the Pope had such a macabre supper was an affront. So I re-read *Horns*, I ordered Papa Ramps' CDs and I read everything on/about his work. It was clear to me that he was not making a simple statement of the macabre - but he was indeed 'politicking' (one of his phrases) and he was kicking the establishment of the church right in its teeth.

The sentiment of the Pope and abortions was such a explicit anti-establishment position to take because of the Catholic Church's position against all forms of contraception. This poem is not testament of Rampolokeng's hatred of the church. It is an exposure of the church's contradictions and hypocrisy. First, the Church's willful ignorance of the significance of women figures in the life of "the Messiah." Secondly, the church's stance against contraceptions and lastly, the misconceptions of African history. To call Shaka 'a cannibal' means the exact opposite - that this is how he is viewed and portrayed by those he conquered.

This 'analysis' is neither new nor unique. It is rather apparent and obvious. I make it for effect; to show that Rampolokeng is anti-establishment, but he is the seeker of truth.

Basotho praise-poets have done this for a long time. This way of writing - of saying one positive thing, when you mean the exact opposite – is *ho kobisa* in Sesotho.

A praise poet of the King could say 'our stomachs are full because of the brilliance of our King.' If the praise poet said this during the height of famine caused by a war that the King sponsored, we are to understand that he means the exact opposite.

Rampolokeng - knowingly or not - borrows from this tradition of praise-poets who were not afraid to tell the King that he is naked - but either through *ho kobisa* or intricately dressed-words.

In the poem; *9mm Anthem* from his *Half Ranthology*, Rampolokeng tears into the political establishment. His opening line is full of cheek and anti-political sentiment:

> *I wish I could say, 'Kill a*
> *politican a day/*
> *and keep corruption away'/*
> *But I am still responsible. ..*

He proceeds to say that this is an anthem for the 'killing of the politician.' Rampolokeng is not homicidal – he is talking about another kind of death. It is evident when he says that

> *it wasn't me sergeant*
> *it was the microphone of my*
> *imagination.*

He is indeed an 'intimate analyst' of his society and its shenanigans. And we need such analysts - every society does. But Rampolokeng stands alone in his league and class.

Throughout his writing he does something that other – especially young poets – do not do! He pays homage to all manner of artists that influenced him directly or indirectly; even to those that he admires. He refers to young and old artists in the same breath.

Among the young folk, Rampolokeng is particularly fond of Hymphatic Thaps; the young Lesotho-born rapper who is descendant from the great JP Mohapeloa. He also had an affinity for the late Robo The Technician.

Rampolokeng's jazz influence is not only apparent; but also intentional. Jazz is the music of his generation - and Johnny Dyani features prominently in his work. Keorapetse Kgositsile – that father of rap (the Last Poets derived their name from his poem) is a muse for Rampolokeng. So is Mattera, Gil-Scot, Ingoapele and Mtshali. His *Jazz for Dyani*, *To Gil-Scot Heron* are just the clearest examples of this tribute to the artists who came before him and had a massive effect on him/his work. I mention these names and influences of Lesego Rampolokeng because for a genius of his status, this is a fresh breath of air - to recognise those who came before you, those whose 'poetic breast' you suckled from and the young guns that are holding your fort. Artists today are focused on themselves and their images and do not openly bow their heads to other great artists.

In *Treason* Rampolokeng's pays a gut-wrenching tribute to the stalwarts of the anti-apartheid struggle. Perhaps it is the Kalahari Surfers' melancholic drum 'n bass melody in the background that evokes all kinds of emotion too.

About Dulcie September he says:

I remember they dismembered Dulcie September

and about Ruth First he says:

Without Ruth, they invested in the death of the truth of Ruth First

on Hector Peterson;

through the fallen leaves of our lives
I hear the pitter-patter beat of the hectic heart of Hector Peterson

and regarding the forgotten hero, Stanza Bopape (unless you count street names as adequate means of rememberance) he says:

prophetic after poetic stanza rolled before it was ripped from Stanza Bopape

He continues to wax lyrical about others, such as the Mngxenges, David Webster, Oscar Mpetha and Lumumba.

Guerilla is a tribute again to the underground forces of the liberation struggle. It is an ode to the machine-gun-toting Africans – from Lusaka to Luanda, to Morogoro! It is a swansong to the fighters left in the vast plains of the continent where freedom battles took place.

Fact is, Lesego Rampolokeng is a once-in-a-lifetime artist. His poetry and prose are unparalled. Many poets will have to live many lifetimes of writing, before they can achieve what Rampolokeng has achieved in one. His canon is equal to none and his work deserves the attention, admiration and critique that it is getting. He has produced work for reading, stage and for television – he has given us a piece of his soul with every work.

Rampolokeng is not everyone's cup of tea. If he was an elephant, and we were the three blind men, we would all discover different parts of him and have different impressions of him.

He has been kind to some and very harsh to others. He has been a chauvinist to some women and a passionate man to others. He has been an excellent teacher to many students and a nightmare to the unfortunate few. He ruined a few events and festivals. He told a few people off in public and he has been utterly petulant to some of us. But still we love him - for his work, his anger and spirited angst, his passion for his art and his brutal truth and often-brash honesty. He has been crass in public - but so have we all! He has shouted at me on the phone for an hour non-stop. This has not diminished my love, admiration and impression of his work and his incomparable craft of the word.

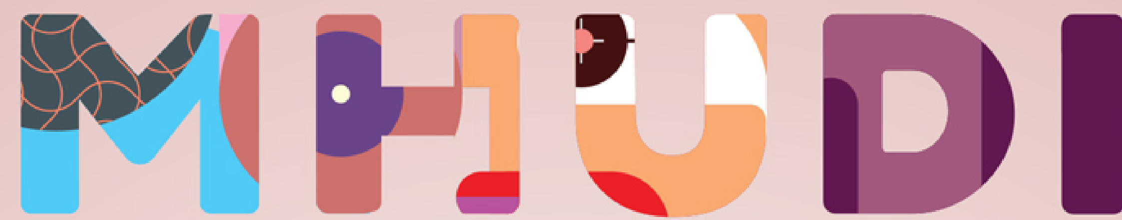
This edition is not about whether we should like Rampolokeng as a person or not. He has acknowledged that his poetry/art is not a popularity contest. He says that he does not engage in 'word play', because words can be dangerous; the Nazis were founded on the word. 'So I do not play with words ...' This is what we adore Rampolokeng's work for. He has acknowledged that he is not doing this for 'props.' He is not a 'pimple poet.

This edition is a preferment and elevation of Lesego Rampolokeng's impressive oeuvre – whether he agrees with us or not. It is about his work and how we continue to be impressed, inspired and enlighted, moved and stirred by it.

BKO is no *Paris Review* or *The New Yorker*, but we intend to exalt his work for its quality and importance in the general, impoverished literary landscape of (South) Africa. Yet, no one edition of a magazine, or book will be enough to encapsulate the immense stature of the work of the literary giant that is Lesego Rampolokeng. He is our Baldwin and Fanon all in one.

PHEHELLO J MOFOKENG is an author and a publisher. His first non-fiction book, Sankomota: An Ode in One Album (Geko, 2018) chronicles the music of one of southern Africa's foremost music bands, Sankomota.

CENTENARY EDITION



AN EPIC OF SOUTH AFRICAN NATIVE LIFE A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

SOL T. PLAATJE

INTRODUCTION BY
PHEHELLO J MOFOKENG