

Part A: Thesis

Reminiscing In Tempo: Ubangulo

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by

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Reminiscing In Tempo: Ubangulo

"Mother loosen my tongue or adorn me with a lighter burden",
Audre Lorde.

**"Jama ka S'Jadu ndiyeza, ndikhumbul' ibele.
Ilizwe lindehlule, ndiyeza, ndikhul' ibele",
/bele, Intone and INDWE**

ABSTRACT

My thesis is a collection of poems that focuses on black mothering and motherhood, within the context of the Eastern Cape's violent history, its oppressive patriarchal cultural traditions and religious structures. Drawing from my own experiences, my poems explore what Toni Morrison calls the historical 'wounds' of black women which are transferred to their daughters within everyday spaces like the kitchen and the lounge, through objects like tea cups, chair backs and the various foods that every black girl needs to be able to prepare in order to be 'marriagable', and how these continue to hurt and emotionally disfigure us.

I also draw influence from Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe and Tina Campt on black lives and the effects of slavery within their daily existences. And I am inspired by the intimacy and care with which Tadeusz Rosewicz writes about his relationship with his mother in *Mother Departs* and Sandra Cisneros' use of interconnected vignettes to engage childhood, culture and community within marginalized space. Stylistically I am influenced by the structural innovations in Fred Moten's *The Little Edges* and the dreamy landscape in the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca.

My collection includes prose and lyrical poetry, combining more formal sound and rhythmic structures with free verse, to bring to life motherhood and the narratives we carry from childhood into our adult lives.

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ONE

"Living in/the wake of slavery is living 'the afterlife of property' and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother",

Christine Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*.

"As far back as I can remember, there has always been a place to which I belonged with a certainty that nothing has been able to take from me. When I say place, that means less a geographical locality and more a group of people with whom I am connected and to whom I belong",

***To My Children's Children*, Sindiwe Magona.**

She stirs the beads she had just strung together inside a shallow bowl. under the tree
we are sitting next to are fallen wild berries in many colours all oval and round-
shaped all heavy with the fruit they carry poisonous scattered at the edge of the river
near our feet. She lifts the bowl now filled with burnt leaves and a bright red liquid.
She places it on the top of her out-stretched legs uses both her arms to call
us to the bowl and our faces dip into its smell we hum the chant that begins the journey.

inside Her wrinkled hand there are red beads a black dot in the middle. She places
one each under our tongues she weaves a long plat on the middle of our heads
a strand from the tail of her brown cow. we bow as she does it. She pours red-
brown soil inside our palms Her fingers rise above them soil
falling from their tips heavy onto ready hands. She looks up smiles. from behind
the tree others appear they carry smaller bowls a single line of smoke rises from
their center. they blow the line towards the river it bends and glides away from them.

through the river's reflection we can see the mother's tired breathes the new born girl
howls in the hands of the older woman her wet dark skin reflecting back to us above.
the women in the hut begin our chant back and forth back and forth they sway the child.
it stops its cry suddenly and we look behind us to see Her stir the beads in Her bowl again.
the baby resumes its cry. we turn and pour ashes on the mound of earth that she had sat on
up here before it was her time. she does not need this house anymore she now lives below.

the sun rises we turn our faces toward it form a circle our feet touch the edge of her mound.
our shoulders vibrate to the rhythm of our feet the dust from the ashes rises the middle
of our circle is warm. as the ashes encircle our waists our backs the sun's rays fall onto our
foreheads as we face it our feet stepping as one. one by one we bend our backs dip our faces
into the middle. She walks around behind us sprinkles water onto our backs She carries the
bowl over our backs walks to the beat of the stamping feet Her hips swaying Her face turned
to the sun. the chant rises from the middle we stand in awe down below they lift the baby up.

we gather around the tree that She lives in the earth around it soft wet with the smell of rain.
there are three bowls at Her feet each filled with seeds soil water She whispers in each
bowl before She sets it down to take up the next. we wait for Her eye to rest on one of us. in
the wait there is a hum the unity of bodies that breathe in time with the other we each carry
a song that is not the other's song it has the same rhythm. She gets up and walks weaves her
way between our bodies we are bend down on our knees our chins rest on our thighs She
begins to sing. our backs are heavy the load she places on each of us. She sings on.

Each one that leaves becomes one of the blooms at the top of Her tree the seeds in the middle
Of the bloom are the magic She stirs for the ones who remain who wait to be sent whose
Breathes are still Hers and have not merged with a chosen mother to walk the land below. She
Sings when the time is right for one to leave She gathers the others Her eyes tell her who is
Ready. When the dance begins at dawn the chosen's body has already become hard of skin her
Body has a center through her eyes She sends a sharp ray that pierces and builds a glow
We gather around the tree to greet her we touch her skin we mark her chest with our breath.

At the foot of the front of the tree She whispers and we rise to meet Her the great shape of Her
Before us. The chosen has begun her solo chant. Our shoulders move to the raspy sound of her
Song. She makes two cuts at the base of the back of her neck the light from her eyes seeps out.
Her hands cupped She catches some and rubs Her hands with it before Her work begins.

She stirs the beads she had just strung together inside a shallow bowl. under the tree
we are sitting next to there are fallen wild berries in many colours all oval and round-
shaped all heavy with the fruit they carry poisonous scattered at the edge of the river
near our feet. She lifts the bowl up now filled with burnt leaves and a bright red liquid.
Places the bowl on the top of her out-stretched legs Uses both her arms to call
us and our faces dip into its smell we hum the chant that begins the journey.

Ubangulo

Grandmother safety pin in hand
twists my foot towards her face,
downside up pries the thorn out.

Nguwe Iqhawe (Why We Dance)

dust leaps up to our waists
the souls of our feet
meet your essence in the soil beneath.

the trees whisper these songs
that move our bodies

we live inside the palm of your hands
your wrinkled faces
inside the linings of our skins.

Intsomi kaMakhulu

we gather ourselves around you
on the matress in the middle of your round house.
we listen and you tell us who we are. One of us
will feel your fingers curl around the knots of our hair
with their head against your body will hear years
rush through your body into ours and we will remember.

Village Mornings

there are cows that graze all day
scattered on the green grass of the quiet landscape

a blanket of fog hovers over the pointed roofs
clouds of smoke dance in the morning breeze
from pots that boil porridge and water and the
brown cow's milk.

the workers and schoolchildren wait on benches by the door

grandmothers guide the hand of mothers
as they stir and will the day into being.

the walls of each house held together by their hands
they pray their children out into the morning air.

The Birthing Pool

black babies are born in dark rooms.

expectant mothers file in and take

position against the roundness of the hut walls,

hold their empty hands out and wait for their wounds.

each sit in their own bath

eyes shut round black bellies half-immersed.

the pain moves between the head and the bottom of the belly.

*inside the pain dogs in leashes white policeman's stern fingers white sharp teeth
bullets constant smell of blood black bodies falling the rain of fire gun powder fire!
yellow vans crammed with black bodies crammed with howling mouths and screaming
lung*

your hips slowly release the new ones

the air is thick with doubt.

Creed

Breastmilk

I believe in God

You wipe your forehead

breastmilk

with the bottom half

warm baby mouth

of your frilly apron

around the areola

volcanic bursts spit

white honey-glazed

at you

sorcery

from your worn tin pot.

rains down into small bodies

small feet on mommy's mouth

soft tugs, large sleepy eyes.

Periods

red dot

in the middle

pink flowered panties

the womb

readying itself

secretes a scarlet

spell in liquid form.

God is a woman.

Mtha Welanga

your head tilts sideways
slightly
as your knuckles rub against
our stains
inside your metal tub outside your kitchen door.
we walk
'through the valley of the shadow of death'
unfazed.
your clean scent clings to our bodies.

emasimini

rows of their children's food basket in the sun.

mothers/grandmothers/aunts/daughters

sit under a tree and share lunches

their hoes and spades rest at their feet heavy and tired.

in the afternoon they carry their loads on their heads.

their little ones skip beside them, their tummies full.

the market

I take a taxi from school every day wait in the middle seat, bag on my lap.

outside my window on each aisle between each destination line
the market ladies sit with their fruits sweets surf joy ice-cream sticks
pink-colored juice that costs a rand letters, gossip to pass on to passengers
from other passengers. Rows of aprons faces covered in calamine lotion
upside down buckets as chairs songs laughter shared skhaftinas.

one makes a sale another reaches down her bra a money bag appears
provides change for the sale exchanges coins with taxi drivers.

there are babies who grow inside cardboard boxes at their feet.
sometimes they give free bananas to us kids who wait for taxis after school.

umgalelo (to carry another's child)

at the bottom of mother's/grandmother's purse
gathered coins mints rosary beads.

on Sunday afternoons each mother
throws her coins inside a teacup and prays
food and song tears and sorrows laid out.

daughters serve tea
and later help mother count the money.

Absence

UMas'thathu died while giving birth to uMam'Nzotho.

UMam'Nzotho picked oranges on a farm eThyushe.

she went away for months.
her children forgot her stories
they remember their church.

Uma'Dlamini loved her white babies in King Williams Town.

she left her brown babies
with uMam'Nzotho
in search of their milk.
they forgot her lap
they remember their teachers.

mother pilgrimage

to sit on the edge of culture and religion

to struggle to keep your language inside your children's mouths

to carry your sister's child

to keep *izigebenga* away

to smile at your master's shiny floors

to hide textbook pennies under stones.

to sleep at dawn to wake at dawn.

to plate up courage at the breakfast table.

to love and love and love in the midst of lack.

to fill your stomach with your children's crumbs.

house

the clothing line

she holds our things.

fresh laundry

porcelain dogs

shoulders clipped by wooden pegs

Catholic candles with Rosaries.

unsayable things said in hushed voices.

the flowered curtains behind her window

shield the chaos

blocked by the flapping.

the laundry a private confessional.

Ihilihili

have you wandered off?

left your name behind?

have you eaten off the plate

of another? Far from your own?

is your throat choking from these

diluted waters?

when you place your hand

along the top of your forehead

do you see your mother's home?

ruins

weeds grow through the cracks of the walls

the wooden doors worn thin by the passage of time.

collared voices cloaked in stern colored robes

still sing

still breathe, and ring their bells on Sunday mornings

lining our mothers up in silent pews on tired knees.

they still walk with their hands clasped together in silent pleas.

walking still, the 'stations of the cross'.

James 1 vs 2-4

I sit on the steps of St Paul's front door
my chin rests on my stockinged eight-year-old knees
I wait for the end weekly after-church mothers' meetings.

Picking and pulling at the undone seams of the stockings
I wonder why He requires so much from the people He made.

"Count it all joy!" He commands from the heavens
and we do down here
as we walk back home every Sunday in our flowered dresses.

to our half-empty cupboards and bitter fathers
skittish little girls and angry boys who kick empty beer bottles as if
they were a face. "Count it all joy!" our streets choke us with their dust.

Mothers in each home serve sugar water from their "Cups Of Salvations"
douse the wounds to soften their crusts and open them for new air.

worship and [temporary] healing

Mother I cannot hear your voice
inside the house of God.
Your uniform is too tightly buttoned.

When the hymns begin
and you line up in the aisle
your purple bodies sway side to side side to side
I see only glimpses through the stained-glass windows.

For a moment your sorrows sit on a pew beside you and your
body is light your throat unclogged from its daily bruises as
you sing untethered to the turmoil that sits waiting at your front door.

I want the hymns to go on and on and on.

her Holy communion

a little girl is sitting on her bed
watching her grandmother put on her church uniform
on a Sunday morning.
it covers every inch of her grandmother's body.
no one ever sees the bruises from the night before.

massacre (Bisho 1992)

Morning the streets are unusually quiet
 only the radio circles our neighborhood
 birds
 ball bouncing against the wall
 the distant clanking of a madman's cans
 rattling in a trolley
 the still air pregnant.

Afternoon mothers/grandmothers
 rush in and out, crooked gates
 dust dancing around feet
 as they flood the streets
 in desperation.

"where is Mthuthuzeli?"

"has Nomsa returned?"

"do you know whose child's body you jumped over next to the stadium?"

I am sitting on the stoep
with the cat
waiting for mother.

Evening there is quiet chatter
 sad, lonely wailings on the verandas.
 my ten-year-old eyes are heavy with sleep.
 I count my relatives one more time
 in my head.

amabaso (a Holy procession)

it is the gifts I guess or the gather of mothers
that gives the scent of obligation or the ghostly
presence of the fathers to whom the girl's cows belong.

everybody breathes in each other's tattered torn words
hands them to the bride-to-be in a teacup.
all their wounds are knitted into the straw mat

she sits on the mat behind her mother-in-law's
kitchen door all the words adorn her subdued body.

to the women who stay through the bruises because they are mothers

sometimes my heart holds my breath.

maybe if I stay still

God will blow peace under our front door

the alcohol will freeze its punches

loosen its grip from my six-year-old shoulders nine twelve fourteen.

my sleep will come easy.

twenty-four-year-old me walks like mother into my own angry front door.

to the women who hold other women through the bruises

I pour the tea listen with my eyes
my ear discreetly turned so I cannot see.

the mothers teacups in hand wade
through her teas teach her how to sit
still next to anger. How to hold it
within the walls of her house.

her daughters will catch its dust
they will cough feather-duster in hand
they will carry its lashes inside the palms of their hands.

I spill tea onto the coffee table I am
fourteen I should know better.

TWO

"She wished for Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying, 'lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield",

Beloved, Toni Morrison

Soundsteps

they beat the drums
at the entrance of the kraal

calamined faces face the sun
the song bursts into
the bodies of the children.

I take two steps back
retreat my back bumps
into the soil under their feet.

the soil holds the shape of their feet

except mine

they always hover.

Pietà 1: GRAND/mother

Grandmother [Origin Old English]

the mother of one's father or mother

"both of my grandmothers were from Scotland"

function a bridge between the old and the new

UMakhulu [Origin isiXhosa]

older version of mother, the mother of one's father or mother

"all my children live at home with uMakhulu"

function mothering 1) mothers

2) the children of mothers

3) people i.e. Neighbors, relatives, strangers

a bridge between the old and the new.

Pietà 2: to cradle a grave

Grand/mother has long arms

they gather the hips of mothers make space
on her cluttered lap for all the Rosary beads
that fall from their fingers as they pray.

she holds out the skirt of her apron to catch them.

Pietà 3: bandages

all her anguish lies on her lap

long strands ready, breathing

she wraps each strand

double-tight across the child's chest

her face

her back

and throws pieces of her umbilical cord into the raging fire.

the little one lies still across the lap her lungs filled with smoke.

all of her mother festers around her tight new body.

Pietà 4: sack cloth and ashes

in the middle of the room stands a tall throne
its edges pierce her back as she sits, she breast/feeds

the fire has died down
her lap tilts from the heaviness she must bare

she watches the coals dim down and the ashes cover the baby's back.
she must drag her wound around now outside of her body.

An Ode to Heritage Day

five white dots
in a circle on each cheek.

beads and beads and beads
around ankles and wrists
brown necks held upright
 they walk to the sound
 of the soil beneath their feet.

I am wearing a pair of jeans
a Mickey Mouse t-shirt
cross-legged on the couch with a cup of tea.

Heritage
I search for your certainty
Page through this book of culture
Where children belong to fathers.

Heritage
I am my mother's mother's daughter
your beads do not fit my wayward birth.

Mother/Tongue

this morning there are soldiers
gun-parading the lengths of our streets.

I walk to school in the fog.
bite my inner cheek
breathe out my privilege.

other children sound asleep in their beds
dream of schools smoke-infested with teargas
cradle their language between stomach and knee.

the soldiers salute me in English as I pass
my tongue buried inside my brown-tainted pockets.

How to keep a girl safe from every/many things [the dance]

1

How to fold a shirt.
This is how to swallow bile
back down your throat
to keep your hands clean.

2

Sit up straight on the couch
so you don't crease
the chair backs.
Don't spill tea.
We are clean people.

3

Swing your legs
under the chair
in church,
like chewing gum.
Forbidden!

4

Walk
don't skip.
Don't sit at the back in the taxi
or in the front.
Take the middle seat!

5

The Bold and the Beautiful
Days of Our Lives
Generations

Church

6

Get out of the sun.

Do you want to be a dark girl?

7

Marry light.

You don't want a dark little girl.

MA/kazi [great mother]

Aunt [Origin Old English]

the sister of one's mother or the wife of one's uncle.

function member of one's family.

Makazi [Origin isiXhosa]

great mother, the sister of one's mother

function a second mother to one's sister's children

a girl mother when one's sister 'falls' pregnant in High School

member of one's family

Dabawo [Origin isiXhosa]

the sister of one's father

function helps mother her brother's children

Malumekazi [Origin isiXhosa]

the wife of one's uncle

function helps mother her husband's sister's children

Intombazanana [Origin isiXhosa]

girl

function young nanny to younger siblings/neighbourhood children

trainee house/home cleaner

trainee wife/woman/doormat

practice prop for boys who will be men

trainee mother/aunt/makazi/malumekazi/makhulu.

mother lessons

remember the day
you bought us rollerblades?
it was December.

that day I was born
and I died.

you held my shoulders
while I learned to glide.
I forgot I was the extra child.

the phantom limb of your childhood shame.

how to mother yourself

I stopped circling the clutter
of my mother's house.

I built my own just like it
with extra windows
to loosen the hold to lighten the load.

I cradled my body close to its heart
and fed its gaping chest crumb by crumb
bits from its own marrow.

how to thicken your own skin

stir your questions/worries into Mother's
sweet-milked tea watch them swirl
around Mother's teacups-for-visitors.

unpick the tight stitches of Mother's embroidery
from the surface of your skin. use Mother's needle.

move the saucer out from under the teacup
let the tea spill to the floor. don't
mop it up. let it stain the carpet with your spit
and line the edges of the spill with your breath.

breathing under water

my feet carry me down the isle my family's dignity inside my hands
next to the small bouquet surrounded by droplets of sweat.
right there in front of God I gave birth to a new self the other girl
inside me left to stand at the church door silent waiting a smile
shaped like an o on her dry cheeks. the new girl/woman
has flung herself at the feet of all the smiling mothers she kneels
and drinks from their cups of submission descends under the river
to serve to bite her tongue to smile under her tight wrapped head.

I want to come up for air, my body has no gills, my chest has no anchor.

Thula Baba

your index finger in stuck
on the center of my lips.

do not provoke men
do not provoke men
do not provoke men.

lessons while sitting at mother's feet.

maybe this is why I get along better with men.

boys even.

there is a directness to the hurt

they give:

punches in the face

blood runs down the corners of lips

wiped off with backs of weary hands.

I learnt to search the lines of women's eyes

for wrong-doing.

Mother taught me.

there is no blood that runs here.

there is liquid coldness kept in bottles

that stain the surfaces they sit on.

remembering and washing

she skips the jump-rope

eyes tight shut, 1, 2, 3

your mother is a girl

your mother isn't married

where did she find a girl like you?

1, 2, 3 her feet hover in the air

the ground is too shaky she cannot land.

this other place she belongs to

locked inside her mother's teeth

this place where mothers are girls and

fathers are dust swirling in the wind 1, 2, 3

she skips and counts the clock backwards.

how to grow a girl (in thorny gardens)

I did not get pregnant

At 16

or 18.

I learnt how to make tea

without spilling/discreetly listen

for snippets of neighbors' lives.

How/when to cry:

silently – to change a man's mind

loudly while throwing things- to get the attention of neighbors

to scare a child into submission

to make lies believable

How/when to get pregnant.

How to hide the pregnancy

under a wedding dress.

How to talk when pretending to be nice.

How to talk when others pretend to be nice.

How to cook liver

even though you hate liver,

because men love liver with fried onions.

How to smile/where.

Don't eat a mango in front of a man

you will not catch a husband

or later catch/get pregnant

mother/anonymous/the searching

1. my back is logged inside
the cracked corner of granny's house

my cousin's breath
asks my face
"WHO IS YOUR MOTHER?"

my words sit at the bottom of my stomach

they stay there
until his white smile backs away

2. mother eyes averted
plasters my patchy skin.
I peel the glue lose
let my sores seep
so she can see me.

she walks ahead to church
but the only hips
my legs know well belong to my aunt

I stumble behind
let my sores seep
seep through my flowered dress

I want to sit on her hip.

3. the thing that sits heavy
on mother's eyelids
spins a web around
my body my chest.

I am covered in scales.

one by one they fall
to the ground
each step I get closer
toward your gate.

girl mother, muted

shoulders too heavy she cannot bounce her infant girl.

bites her tongue when she talks

hesitates looks for permission.

she cries by the washing

lines of wet nappies flap in the wind

hide the sounds of her choking

nahoon clinic (2011)

they never sit

the young mothers.

wait by the door, always ready to leave.

from their world of girlhood, they hold babies

who squirm in protest and shout for their grandmothers.

their blank stares dodge disapproval.

the nurse calls their babies' names thrice

then they remember.

how NOT to catch a husband
(a mother's guide for a daughter)

soften your tongue

ride in fast cars while chewing gum

choose not to go to church

like the boys

tipex the holes in your stockings.

bury your head in books.

sit like a boy/man

argue like boys/men

carry a tea tray with slouched shoulders

spill the water on the saucers with shoulders slouched.

eat

when you are hungry, bored,

while you walk, shoulders slouched.

say what you mean.

eat the last piece of cake

speak while laughing

laugh always out loud outside.

walk because you have feet

walk around barefoot.

daydream while dirty dishes crowd the sink.

think a lot out-lo

THREE

Ubangulo

"Hattie wanted to give her babies names that weren't already chiseled on a headstone in the family plots of Georgia, so she gave them names of promise and of hope, reaching-forward names, not looking-back ones",

The Twelve Tribes Of Hattie, Ayana Mathis

Mother Trilogy

three mothers in a circle

one girl in the middle at their feet on the floor

there are hers their lungs pour out into her breathing

fontanel their hands held they dance around her yellow-brown
body they turn her into a woman.

three hearts six hands

three backs to carry her burden

to clear her throat to bath her in their

breadcrumbs and tea and milk.

she lives she lives she lives

how to sing a lullaby to yourself

that first night at home with my 2.8kgs of human
I nursed myself into the mother self.

that night I cast a mother spell on my body
made up my own chant danced it sewed it into
the bellybutton so that I remember its sound.

Lullaby

clean the umbilical stump
don't let your hands shake
eat for your milk rest
check the bathwater temperature with your elbow

Daughter

Daughter [origin old English]

the girl child of a mother and/or father

function child member of a family

Intombi ka [origin isiXhosa]

the girl child of a mother and/or father

the child who will bring cows to her family when she marries

the child who will look after her parents if she does not marry

Mafungwashe the first daughter of a family [except if she is illegitimate]

function little housekeeper

child member of a family.

Other/Mothers

sometimes there are women
who arrive made of wars.
they bring their guns

sometimes without knowing
they place knives at our throat
throttle the quiet desperation us girls
clasp on our laps.
when we sit heavy in our silences
they interrupt and hand our words
back to us.

I built a fort with mine.
I cleared an empty space within myself
barricaded by war rubble.
where was the chair to place my
new mother/self? Where was any
rest to prop my unsteady back?
I needed to be rocked there were no
hands ready.

barefoot I stood on a mountain
my head raised my hands as a
horn I called them in a whisper.
they came and my arms grew.
my teeth released my inner cheeks
my heels sank grounded into the earth.

I still drink my fear with a straw
every morning the other/mothers hold my shoulders
while I drink. They spread out their words across the floor beside
my feet I walk and I do not trip.

the birthing pool (2)

black girls pass through the
wide hips of black mountains
when they arrive. Wrapped in
prickly blankets they sit on many laps drink many milks
many hands pat their arched backs to burb them, to catch them.
their chins sit still on these shoulders when their stomachs
are filled with stale air and it hurts to move or to cry.

their hands are held by ancient hearts as they journey past here.

Shadow Girl

She lives behind things.
in the dark corners of passages
gymn changing rooms
inside the walls of people's houses
listening.

She holds her own hand
to cross busy streets
with noises and thorns
and one-eyed dolls with torn lips.

She never arrives home.

'where does she come from mommy?'"
nowhere
She just grew.

Star Child

"mommy your eyes grow lines
around them when you laugh"

she pokes my eye
runs her finger along the lines.

I arrived with my back
cradled by these lines.
my years are line drawings
in red ink and razor wire, engraved
as love and wound.
these wrinkled faces lent me
their load and my back breaks.

"where is the load mommy?"

it sits on the stoep of my
great-grandmother's house.

I set it down to pick you up.

the needlework box

we took our boxes home to be covered in 'nice paper'.
Mrs Blaine wanted each one to look pretty on her shelves
and add to the brightness of her yellow Std 2 classroom.

we spent hours on it my aunt and I making decisions
on how it would stand out from the others on that shelf.
on the floor of our tiny apartment she unscrewed my
body from the wall of 'sameness' in our school's corridors.
She m/othered me into my inside self the other different
coloured nine-year-old self that lived deep inside my body
only to come out at night when only the moon is witness.

on Monday morning I proudly marched into school my
box held to my chest covered in orange-patterned fabric
bright and daring. my friends frowned because it was not
pink. Mrs Blaine beamed because it was covered in fabric -
appropriate for a box that would carry our domestic futures.

on the floor of our tiny apartment that weekend she
baptised me into the skin just under the one I paint on daily
for the crowds outside she m/othered me into myself.

when a daughter has a daughter

she lies on my chest while they stitch me up.

I look around for a voice to show me how to
hold her so she stays behind my shield
without feather-dusters and tea fitments of
aprons crockery.

she breaths on my chest I hold the nurse's
hand I want to run.

Phala

how you embody your name.
everything done as if there will
not be enough day left to do it in.

even when asleep your hands fidget
and you chant words to yourself
forehead creased in truth.

"with great power, comes great respomsebelity"

your little finger and index point
to the unseen villain.
I watch you from your open door
and hope you keep those words
inside your mouth.

Yanda

she speaks in dance
words slide through her gapped teeth
unhurried.

"do you benember mommy? Huh? When I was small do you benember?"

I still am benembering I want to say
because you are still small
inside the palm of my hand.

HOME (1)

I have had 'mother arms'
tied to my wrists since birth.

perhaps I was searching for these words 'my child'.

they gave me a boy
covered in white film
mouth wide open
wrists clenched tight in protest.

my 'mother arms' received

I found these words inside of me.

HOME (2)

The morning when you first arrived
I woke up and welcomed the trouble.

our eyes locked and I smelled your questions,
washed the inside of my mouth with them
and tasted the trouble.

black hair, tight curls.

You were sent you wrapped in Dark.

my fingers learned to braid the top of your head
polish your Dark teach you never to explain.

the hours/efukwini

these babies had 1095 days of my
arms time space.
26 280 hours plus nine months.

this time is etched in a line at the bottom of my stomach.
I run my finger along its edges every night before I sleep.

6 years divided by 2 babies 2 arms
1 back 10 fingers 2 legs to
keep clean air inside each tiny chest.

6 years to out-care my mother's neglect.

lesson from my living room floor

"home is for sleeping"

says my three-year-old teacher

a diplo block half-lodged inside his teeth

home where he rests his head strands

of drool soaking the chest of my t-shirt or

shoulder sleepy breath that tiptoes over my

face in the dead of night my body the landscape of his dreams.

lessons from my kitchen cupboard

"I'm being food"

says my almost three-year-old fairy.

I open the cupboard door she sits next to the cans of pasta sauce.

"I want to know how its like before you get eaten"

I close the door again chop chunks to butternut slices

listen to her silence in there and wonder what it really is like before
you get eaten.

Scar

there is a faint line

at the bottom of my
stomach, at the center

of my body a
bridge a portal.

at night I run my finger
along its thin length

to prove you both exist and you are
mine.

my body is an empty home now you live
outside of my vulnerabilities.

my body is adorned by the scalpel that
sliced through this thick layer of doubt
with a scar that gave me back to myself.

water/mirror

our hands stuck to our foreheads we look back down behind us.
“they look afraid will they not run from us?”

the mothers their sticks in hand look up at us from the below
and beckon wrinkled arms weary from the weight of direction.
we climb down to meet their smiles they hand us their sticks.
circle our doubtful bodies once turn wrinkled faces away
into the water. we wait for them sticks in hand to submerge.

back up the hill we ready our new steps drag the weight of our
instruction into the past. the ones who walk this land have long
forgotten the walk of freedom. death sits on their shoulders even
as they are born they walk on muddy thorns blind and tired.

we wait at the river's edge will the people to see us feel us?
an old woman walks by with a little girl by her side she turns
the girl's face away from the river begins to sing a hymn to her.

“they will not see their faces mirrored back at them they are
afraid of what they will see who they will see their faces”

we wait submerged and patient like the wrinkled ones.

Part B: Portfolio

Portfolio

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Zodwa Tutani

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**Reminiscing In Tempo: The Process of the Process of Thinking
Through Black Mothering**

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This portfolio tracks my development as a writer during this year of the Creative Writing programme. It unpacks my process of thinking through black m/other/ring/hood towards my thesis and celebrates the writing mothers who have informed and inspired my journey into memory and song through poetry. It comprises of extracts from my reflective journals, poetics essay and book reviews in which I engage themes of mothering, writing and bearing witness, as well as tributes to my writing mothers who informed, provoked and inspired me in thought and the act of writing. I have ordered it in small chapters that explore my process of writing, navigating language and reading m/other/ring/hood.

Reminiscing In Tempo: Ubangulo

The process of the process of thinking through black m/other/ing/hood.

In 1935 Edward Kennedy 'Duke' Ellington, a brilliant American composer, pianist and leader of a jazz orchestra - whose career spanned over six decades - composed a musical equivalent to a prayer in remembrance of his mother who had passed away. I liken it to a prayer because of its layered imagery, the life of a mother beautifully assembled in a fifteen-minute long instrumental hymn that brings her very soul to life. Not only does he mourn this woman, he owns her as only a child could own a parent, he spills their relationship onto his musical notes as if to resurrect her so that he can once more see her whole being around himself. Duke is a name he picked up through friends in the music industry because of the way he carried himself, always neat and a gentleman in the true sense of the word, a manner of living that his mother had instilled in him growing up. A duke, "a nobleman of the highest hereditary rank especially: a member of the highest grade of the British peerage".

What manner of mothering was his mother's? I am thinking of the 1899 in America, the era of the Jim Crow laws where black lives were fair game for racist America. How would a black woman raise a 'duke' in the midst of all that uncertainty? What magic did she possess that compelled her to wade through all the hate and violence that black bodies had to endure and 'love' her son into a man who became beauty through his music and then later conjured the image of his mother up and made it last through the same music?

I chose to think through black mothering with the ears of his composition because of the way he captured the beautiful, difficult, unrewarded and complicated work of mothering in black communities. Here the child is born under a shadow, the mother must weave a blanket that will shield her more than love her. She must teach her to live beyond the boundaries of her home, a place that sees her as inferior and 'other'. There is a harshness that accompanies the hand that raises this child, she dares not love too hard, too fully lest she weakens the child and exposes her bare into the darkness of the night that inevitably follows the growth of a black little girl/boy. This is captured artfully by the South African contemporary visual artist Dumile Feni's Madonna drawings. The usually serene painting of mother and child, baby Jesus and his Mother Mary, are portrayed as moving bodies, anxious and sometimes contorted and raging, but mothers regardless. Feni grew up during the apartheid years and his own experience of being mothered must have been influenced by the atmosphere that the era created, fear and inferiority, and yet a visual genius was raised out of it. He was able to capture the love within the struggle, the mother and her tentative relationship with her child. He/she is on the lap of the mother, placed on top of his/her mother's lifetime of anguish through oppression and systematic poverty, strife and uncertainty she must fashion a kind of love that must sustain this child through to adulthood. Often this love comes with these 'ugly attachments' that the mother has to wade through.

Similarly, South African trumpeter and vocalist Mandisi Dyantyi absorbed this love from a family of singers who lived on song, the women he grew up around filled his childhood with song. His music personifies the voices of these women, hymns and choral music, his horn and piercing voice constructs this love that mothering pours into a child even under strain.

In presenting my thesis I want to speak as June Jordan did through her work because of how;

"she believed that an up-from-the-bottom revolution must include art, laughter, sensual pleasure...she described/defined poems as 'voiceprints of language'...hers are back and forth between manifestos and love lyrics, jazz poetry and sonnets, reportage (when the witness takes a stand) and murmured lust, 'spoken word' and meditative solos, with mood-shifts and image-juxtapositions to match".

Here is my journal in the school of writing and how I lay my burden down and let it sing.

1. Being Mothered By and Through Writing: My Growth as a Writer Over the Year

The beginning of the course was exciting and challenging at the same time, learning the different ways of writing felt like being thrown into a large pit and then asked to swim. I loved the swimming experience and all its late-night reading and notes and my soul completely immersed into words.

Reflective Journal 30

Since the start I saw my work as a dance. I saw my memories and thoughts performing hand in hand and this while listening to a little girl telling a story that is close to her heart. I saw Alice In Wonderland, I loved it as a child, and all my thoughts as a visit into my own rabbit hole with different rooms that I am peeking in to listen, speak and put my rememberings down, good and bad so that I can construct something new from their pieces of string.

This chapter looks at my process of writing through my Reflective Journal entries and is a thought process of my time in the Creative Writing Programme.

Reflective Journal 2

After a binge on poetry performances and talks by Danez Smith, I felt a surge of inspiration to listen to more writers who are interested in the same themes that I am and began to read and listen further. His online performances led me to Jamaica Kincaid, a Caribbean writer I greatly admire and reminded me of the poem of hers that we read in one of the contact week's reading groups called *girl*. The themes she discusses in her writings that interest me are black motherhood and the straddling of two cultures as a black woman. Listening to her online talks fed into my thinking around such issues and

led me to more Caribbean writers that sounded like they had similar thoughts and expressions in their own writings, like Tiphany Yanique, Edwidge Danticat and Victoria Brown. In between all this binging on these writers, I am writing my four assignment poems for our first Creative Writing lecturer Kerry Hammerton's seminar. I am enjoying it. It does feel a little strange to write for an assignment now, in the past, I had been writing for myself, and with no thoughts yet of the work being read by others. This kind of writing is fulfilling though as well because the knowledge that I will get feedback on my work excites me and brings me closer to being a read writer.

Reflective Journal 3

Stacy Hardy is our lecturer for Seminar 2 of the programme and hers was all about the body. My writing has always been based on memories, especially childhood memories and how they affect one as an adult. I have used poetry many times to make sense of something that I remember, but am not clear about, or that worries me but there are no 'proper' words to address it to myself. I used words to communicate with my own self to allow healing or bring forth a happy mood. Stacy Hardy's seminar taught about using the body as a prompt to communicate feelings without using any feeling words. Simply, to write about how the body reacts to certain feelings rather than describing the feeling itself, or the body's reactions as the feeling.

The exercise of drawing body maps seemed childish and a tedious idea at first, and then when I started working on mine I realised how much my scars, my sicknesses and odd-shaped bits of my body were a minefield of unused prompts. I realised how much I could get out of using the map of my body or others' bodies to enhance the language of what it is you are wanting the poem to say.

Reflective Journal 5

Thursday poetry was enjoyable as usual. We looked at Chinese poetry from a thousand years ago, and appropriately in the seminar we looked at rewrites of the old poetry by other writers. It is always interesting to read work that has been translated into English from another language. Although most of the time it comes out lacking in the way the original had intended, it does provide a window into how other languages communicate the different themes of life that poetry speaks of. My favourites were *Lazy*, by Lu Yu (1125-1210) and its re-written version *Idleness* as well as 'Written On A Cold Evening' by Yang Wan-Li (1127-1206) and 'The Art Of Writing' by Lu Ji (261-303). What I enjoyed more was hearing the ancient voices of poetry. In my own culture, even though words were not written until recently, they were spoken. Poetry was spoken and as beautifully as these ancient Chinese voices do in the poetry we read. The re-writes captured beautifully anew, the words that had gotten these ancient ones to sit down and take pen to paper.

Reflective Journal 6

I began reading my anthology choice today. The New Black edited by Richard Thomas. I especially enjoyed 'It's Against the Law to Feed the Ducks' by Paul Tremblay. The story is told through the eyes of a little boy of five who is on holiday with his family. The idea of embodying a little boy's voice as a writer intrigues me because children have an interesting innocent way of looking at life and stories from them come alive through description and the mentioning of things that seem small and unnoticeable to adults but are actually part of the bigger picture in a major way. For instance the way Danny, the little boy, watches his parent's behaviour and body language to understand what is going on around him. Since I mostly write from memory, the skill with which the writer uses these observations by the boy are valuable to me. I also enjoyed 'Father, Son and Holy Rabbit' by Stephen Graham Jones for the same reasons I did the one above. The relations between parent and child, and how to write the intricate details of these and get the emotional baggage that comes with family relationships. This book will also help me with the creation of my short story this week. I am inspired.

Reflective Journal 13

I have been reflecting on the course so far and its impact on my writing. I am definitely writing more, you could nearly say every day, and am finding it easier every day to say the things that have been stuck in my throat before this year. Things I could not find a language for, and finally, I think, writing with a bit more ease. I have also been reflecting on the seminars that we have had and how these may have helped, some more than others, in coming to this stage of my writing. I have decided that Fierce Writing and Writing the Body have really been game changers, as well as Paul Mason's seminar, which I have forgotten the title for. Ok, I have learned something in all of them, but I guess these one stood out for me. Particularly Writing the Body, because so many of the experiences I conjure up when writing have to do with physicality in a way, example is how I used to grab the grass with my toes when I got nervous as a child and I happen to be outside on the lawn. I never thought of this until I was searching for a particular event in my mind and remembered where I stood at that moment, and my toes clutching the grass as if this action would somehow speed up the moment so that it passes. I figured recently that I had got what it was to write the experience of the body in one's work.

I am constantly playing with words and getting closer to where I want to go with the thesis. I am listening to a lot of performance poetry as well and have discovered Warsan Shire. I am in love with her use of words, the way she speaks of trauma in unexpected ways, a dark humour wrapped in blasts of horror and heartache. This is also a way that I want to explore, I do think I do write like this already, if I think of 'Hopscotch', beautiful images that knock you off your feet with sudden violence and trauma. I love the balance between beauty the reality that is always lurking around the corner, beauty's famous cousin violence. Always there, hiding among the flowers.

Reflective Journal 14

I am listening to a lot of old music, music from my childhood and this helps me remember certain details in my memories. For instance, when I listen to Cindy Lauper's *Time After Time* I can see a four or five-year-old image of myself in a white and yellow polka dot dress and I can smell my grandfather's liquor. I can also see the display unit which I was never allowed near and which housed the things I wanted most to play with, two glass birds, a porcelain horse and porcelain salt and pepper containers shaped like a fairy's house and never used. What I can always feel is the tenseness that the house always carried, which made me a nervous kid. Through music, I am unearthing some of the most beautiful memories as well, childhood games and the songs we sang at the playground, some of which were sung in secret as they were 'dirty'. This is helping a great deal with my writing. The memories help a great deal with Stacy Hardy's idea of 'writing the body' as I now can, while travelling back in time with music, see the little moments that defined bigger moments and how my body reacted to them. This allows for an even deeper look into the pictures I am trying to paint.

It's also interesting writing a book review of a collection of poems and other writings. In fact, it is a bit complicated. I am doing *Mother Departs* by Tadeusz Rozewicz for my long book review, his book is beautiful, writing a review on it is kind of hard but because I love it, I am diving in and not letting it intimidate me.

Reflective Journal 15

I am continuing reading *Voices From The Harlem Renaissance*, a book edited by Nathan Irvin Huggins which is a collection of writings by a group who were part of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s; and *Surrealist Women* edited by Penelope Rosemont and a collection of women writers who wrote also wrote during the 1920s and contributed to the Surrealist Movement together at once. I have added Carole Maso's *Break Every Rule* and am fascinated and inspired by my dance with this trio.

'If the creation of literary texts affords a kind of license, is a kind of freedom, dizzying, giddy – then why do we more often than not fall back on the old orthodoxy, the old ways of seeing and perceiving and recording that perception?'

With: 'They characterised this "New Negro"...as having shed the costume of the shuffling darky, the uncle and aunty, the subservient and docile retainer, the clown. He was, rather, a man and a citizen in his own right – intelligence, articulate, self-assured. The "New Negro" was telling all Americans that it was a new ballgame, and that he was a revived and inspired competitor. No longer could he be dismissed by contempt, pity, or terror. He would insist upon his rights and, if necessary, return violence, blow for blow',

With:

'For surrealists, poetry is always discovery, risk, revelation, adventure, an activity of the mind, a method of knowledge leading to revolutionary solutions to the

fundamental problems of life'.

This to me sums up, partially all that I want to do in my writing. These quotes from the three books I have listed above remind me of my intension to use my writing as a witness for those that came before me, that are, and that will be. I hope that my poetry reflects this in the coming future, and that it in some way or another lifts even if one of our marginalised black lives form the muck and despair of self-hatred and inferiority. I hope through my work even one of us may begin to 'see' ourselves. I am always inspired by Lorraine O'Grady's quote:

'To name ourselves rather than be named, we must first see ourselves...so long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look'.

Reflective Journal 11

I liked the exercise of free writes (an exercise where the facilitator gives the writers a sentence and they write from the sentence as a provocation). I love weird ones like the purple pin one because the mind could go anywhere with those, mine went straight to my gran's purple church pin I guess because she has occupied my mind a lot this year, but also because purple instantly means church to me because of her. I grew up catholic, but black catholic where mothers/grandmothers wear a purple uniform to church and have lengthy meetings after each service, leaving children like me and my brother in the car to wait, hungry and tired, for them to emerge and suggest visiting an ailing member before going home...sigh. Every Sunday when I was home from boarding school...until I left for art school after matric. Purple, before anything else comes to my mind when it is mentioned, means church to me.

Reflective Journal 19

First I conjure up an image, let it go for a walk inside my head for a time, expand it, add things and subtract until it is clear and I can see it. It's also simple images that come up from my childhood, but which I also see today still. The image was of uMama doing the washing in the legendary metal tub, where we also used to be scrubbed clean with the bag that carries oranges, outside and usually as a group. I remember wanting to be able to do the washing as a little girl because of watching either an aunt, an older cousin, grandmother, doing it. How their heads would tilt sideways as they worked the dirt out of the clothes. And how they grit their teeth as they wring out the water from the item of clothing...it was fascinating, until I was old enough to do it! But still, I find myself tilting my head now when I wash my son's rugby jersey or daughter's school socks...there is a tenderness and an act of 'unconscious' love within the action. I wanted to write that.

I write as I talk, and while I am doing so I order the words according to a rhythm so that if a sentence does not fit the music in me I take out words and make it work with my breathing. I'm not sure I am explaining this right but basically this is how I write.

And so in approaching the editing, which I already know I will not be good at, I thought I should work with the same technique. There was not much editing needed in Mxolisi's work, I could hear his thoughts and they were well assembled. I read them as I would read my own work so as to catch the breathing moments, and added one or two words that I thought added more meaning and balanced the pieces. It was an experience that I need to spend more time on. I did enjoy it but am constantly wondering if I am doing too much or too little, and how effective are my changes. Also how much 'poetry language' is okay and how much is too much. I love simplicity, but simplicity can also be bland and listening for these kinds of things takes time and working through not doubting your ear. Usually though, I know what I think of a poem in terms of rearranging it...like in music.

2. Speaking in a Motherless Tongue

How I learned to Write the Unsayable

Where does the voice that speaks of painful human experience come from? How does one say the things that sit between words and action, the silence in the experience? I write in search of that voice, the language to release these things. When they can walk among us unhidden, then we will live.

Reflective Journal 2

Danez Smith he speaks of the use of God in black communities as a comforting figure that people have faith in that things will work out for their good. His poem addresses the whereabouts of God during the atrocities that befall his race on a daily basis. Where I am struck is the use of a preacher's voice to address all this. His use of the structure of a church sermon to deliver the anguish in his poetry is well done and is particularly effective when read by himself. In the same way, Jose Olivarez's poem 'Mexican American Disambiguation' highlights the struggles of belonging to the Mexican heritage and then having to navigate American culture without looking down on your own culture. His unapologetic use of Mexican lines in his writing normalises his language to do away with the qualifying of indigenous languages when placed in between the 'dominant' races' language. He uses his own life experience to speak for other people like him who may be going through the things as he is going through, and uses a bit of humour in bringing his message across as well.

Reflective Journal 4

I am done with Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and am wading through Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*. My choices are informed by what it is I am trying to say. Constantly I am plagued by the idea of black mothering/hood and all that it informs in black people's lives. The black mother figure circles my thoughts constantly because I am a mother who was raised by many mothers, who instilled a lot in me, good and negative. I am a collage of these women's voices and have struggled to listen to each clearly without the noise that constructs like class and race clouding my path and deafening the

sounds these women provide. Other people who write these muted voices interest me and help me find ways to unmute them from my own experiences through memory writing. I am grateful for the opportunity to sit in their work and absorb.

Reflective Journal 5

Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl*. Not only does it speak to my research interest, which is black motherhood, it is also written in a style that interests me as well. That compressed way of writing that comes off as a ramble of words, which works perfectly, in my opinion, with recalling a memory on a page. The class was an eye-opener and added more techniques into my way of thinking in the writing space. We discussed works that had been re-written by different authors, including Nathan's own work, which I loved because I really enjoy chatting with real authors about their books, or just being in the same room with one.

Reflective Journal 7

This week was the Marike Beyers seminar week and we did poetry with her. She had selected some pieces for us to read and discuss at the Thursday poetry sessions and then requested that we choose three poems that stood out for us for use in class. I selected 'Ode To My Suit' by Pablo Neruda, 'An Attempt at Jealousy' by Marina Tsvetaeva and 'river Robert' by Seetlamo Matsapi. We discussed poetry through a handout she shared with us from Kenneth Koch, which I found useful later when I went through it after class. It is helpful to read what it is that poetry does in order to know how you as an individual poet would like to convey your messages across. So being reminded that poetry is a 'language within a language' and that it is also 'a language in which the sound of the words is raised to an importance equal to that of their meaning, and also equal to the importance of grammar and syntax'. But my most favourite line was this one: 'Poetry lasts because it gives the ambiguous and ever-changing pleasure of being both a statement and a song'.

Reflective Journal 16

Vonani Bila's 'Ancestral Wealth'. Firstly the musicality in the italicized words 'under these tall thorn umbrella trees, My ancestors rise...'. The repetition of these throughout the poem is beautiful and makes you wonder whether this is a song sung by the ancestors themselves, or the father who has passed away reminding the son of his place under the sun. I love the music in them and the fact that they remind me of the little songs in- between iintsomi. I love the line 'Papa know that John Zulu your uncle donated a beast for the funeral...' and the continuation of it. Here he is telling his father what it is like in his own funeral, as if he is writing a letter to him describing how important he is to his people in case he did not know, but also I see it as a conversation with someone you did not expect should be gone at that moment but he is and you are trying to come to terms with it by narrating the event of it to him. It's beautiful in its vulnerability. The way he lists things he should have done with him but

did not, and how his house looks now in his absence but presence. For me it is a lovely love letter. And this skill of writing to loved ones who are gone is again present in the poem about the missing cousins. Bili is a magician of words. He tells of these events and feelings slowly and thoughtfully, stretches out the descriptions so that the reader enters the spaces with him and lingers there. His works are outpourings.

Reflective Journal 20

I am reading Kaveh Akbar's *Calling A Wolf A Wolf* and Emily Skaja's *Brute* poems. I like taking a walk inside my mind somehow, not so much in content but in the way everything is spelt out. They are storytellers unafraid to go where it hurts, where there is uncertainty and where there is unpleasant truths. All this they do with clear images that live in the reader's mind for a while. For instance, Akbar's *Calling A Wolf A Wolf* delivers its verse with simple but piercing images that display his mind so cleverly that you can physically see what he means:

"I've given this coldness many names thinking if it had a name it would have a solution thinking if I called a wolf a wolf I might dull its fangs I carried the coldness like a diamond for years holding it close near as blood until one day I woke and it was fully inside me".

There is a beautiful vulnerability in his *Learning To pray* poem, where a moment is captured in words and draws the reader into his personal space in an affecting way:

"I ached to be so beautiful...I knew only that only that I wanted to be like him, that twilight father mesmerising as the bluewhite Iznik tile hanging in our kitchen, worshipping as the long faultless tongue of God".

Reflective Journal 28

Writers that have stood out for me this week have been June Jordan, Ada Limon, Warsan Shire, Hilton Als, Marosa Di Giorgio and Natalie Scenters-Zapico. In these writers and their different styles I have found 'ways of speaking', for instance Jordan's particular use of anger in some of her pieces that perfectly articulates the anxiety and uncertainty that black bodies live and Shire's soft and matter-of-fact way of speaking of the horrors of violent parental subjugation. I was inspired by Hilton Als's essay on his mother and its articulation of black mother 'care' in love in the midst of war and the philosophy of 'doing what you can to keep them alive'. Ada Limon's *The Carrying* also really excavated some baggage deep in me, and after listening to one of her talks on her poetry and inspirations I was even more drawn to her work, her experiences of being 'other' and thus able to access mainstream society as one from the margins/periphery. The more I read the different writers' works I am encouraged and it becomes easier and easier to try to say what it is that I am wanting to say in the ways that I am needing to present it.

3. M/other/ing/hood

How To Write Love and Wounds

Through the readings I have encountered in the course and ones that I searched for, I have taught myself about black mothers and how they love. This is my journey into this lovely and painful discovery.

Reflective Journal 13

'She is like the women, starting with my mother, I have tried to keep up with my whole life. You must run breathless just to sit next to them. They prod. They urge. "Look closer; be braver," they say'. This is a piece from Carole Maso's 'House' from the book *Break Every Rule*. I love it because of the women that this line makes me think of. I love the idea of having to 'run breathless' in order to sit with them. There have been many in my own life, and they inspire most the experiences I conjure up when writing, some sad, some traumatic and some delightful, but filled with those women standing by watching. They were often strangers to me, teachers, older friends, people I have met briefly but who made great impacts into my life. It is a beautiful way of describing them.

Reflective Journal 16

I have been spending a lot of time with the book on essays about the 'mother' theme in Toni Morrison's books called *On Mothers and Motherhood* edited by Lee Baxter and Martha Satz. I dwelt on the chapter 'Black Motherhood, Beauty and Soul Murder Wound', an essay by Althea Tait. Here the discussion is the soul wounds, originating from historical oppression and social conditionings, that black mothers pass down to their children in both positive and negative ways. How the kitchen can be a site of the 'mothering' performance both in good and bad ways for themselves and the daughters they raise and how it also represented a space of resistance for the mother as it was, even in the home of her employer, presumed to be her domain. I found many statements that hit me in the face like lightning.

'Because of the perpetual oppression linked to institutional racism, black women, inadvertently and intentionally, have become keepers of the wounds, which they pass down, as Toni Morrison asserts, to the most vulnerable members of society – their daughters'.

And again the line:

'There was nobody for mama to turn to/she was it'.

Both have been true even in my own experience of being mothered as a child and watching and listening to how my black friends and neighbours were mothered.

I immersed myself in all things mothering/hood. I began to see how my work has been surrounded by the idea and then how invested I am in as a whole. I curated and am still doing so, Skhumbuzo Makandula's work *Ingoma ka Tiyo* on the works *Tiyo Soga*. Even

with this work I am focused on his mother, and beginning to see the work as African mothering. Dr Nomathamsanqa Tisani wrote a paper which has been a great deal of help for my curatorial work and projects including the Tiyo Soga exhibitions and writings. In it she talks of 're-visiting elders and even excavating gems that lie hidden, scattered and forgotten in the landscape of our past'. This to me is an act of mothering. Because the reason uMakhulu told her grandchildren *iintsomi*, the reason a mother reminds her children of their clan names, the reason they nurture them in the ways of their people is exactly what she is suggesting above. My whole theme has begun to consume me, in a good way. The lockdown has again been put aside as a bad thing and I am deep in thought and creation.

Reflective Journal 17

I have spent a lot of time with Christine Sharpe's *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* in relation to my interests in the black nation and mothering/hood. I think as I am reading and writing and thinking of this theme I am increasingly aware of what my intentions are and the type of work I am interested in, which I have been doing now that I think about it. Sharpe's book is so painfully and amazingly done:

'Living in/the wake of slavery is living "the afterlife of property" and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother'.

Earlier on in the chapter she had described the wake as:

'grief, celebration, memory, and those among the living who, through ritual, mourn their passing and celebrate their life in particular the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the dead person from death to burial and the drinking, feasting, and other observances incidental to this'.

I found this description an important part of what/how I want to work. Memory and witnessing, celebration and observations are the things or ways of working that I employ in speaking of blackness as a woman. The book is a lovely encourager and companion on my journey into the work of *the wake*.

Reflective Journal 11

I have been enjoying my reading, spending a lot of time with *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women* by Angela Carter. I enjoyed jumping around the book instead of reading it in order of appearance. I particularly loved *The Last Crop* by Elizabeth Jolly. It is the first story on the book but I had started with *The Plums* by Ama Ata Aidoo because I had read *Our Sister Killjoy* as part of a reading group I was part of and loved the adventures of Sissie. In 'The Last Crop' I liked the telling of stories from the margins of life. They rarely told stories of the maid or nanny or cleaner and her daily life, her aspirations and her family. It is a good look at the life of the 'other', and discusses the importance of land and family, the great divide between the haves and the have-nots and explores

the idea that the maid/nanny has dreams as well, something that is often overlooked as they are often invisible 'help'.

Because my own grandmother was a maid, I smiled at lines like:

'The doctor was there too, very nicely dressed, I could see Mother look at his well-laundered shirt with approval'.

It reminded me of her, and how even having left the maid job, she will still wonder if the person who took over after her was doing a good job. Almost like 'her white people' would not survive without her and they better be looking respectable. The said white people have another maid and do not sit and smile at the thought of her enjoying her retirement. There is such good in her that for her her job went beyond what was expected, even if the treatment was often not very good. I also like the description of the land that they had inherited:

'When a calf was born there it could never get up, that was the kind of place it was'.

The reader can imagine the place without a lot of detail, dry, sparsely populated and far from 'civilization'. But also the kind of place that would do well with someone like the doctor, who had the money to turn it into anything, leaving its owners no choice but to give it up. She sees a change in her son's step as he interacts with her father's land and makes a decision based on that change. Mothers do so much more than raise a child, they search them, and find ways of doing so in their eyes.

Reflective Journal 19

I have been reading Noni Jabavu's *The Ochre People* and enjoying the scenery. I have been wanting to do so for a while, because my poetry also comes from other people's experiences of the Eastern Cape, especially before my time, and how they would talk about it in describing it to someone else. The little things like how an aunt or neighbour greets you as a child and how they do so when they recognize that you are now grown...the landscape, Jabavu speaks so vividly about Middeldrift and it's a pleasure to be able to recognize some of the places she is referring to, the pictures she describes as she is driving by...her thoughts and memories made the Eastern Cape come alive again in my mind. I wanted to speak of it using these things like the metal tub, the chicken houses, the things that are simple but distinct in speaking of and articulating the lives of certain people.

Reflective Journal 21

I also spent time with my grandmother and listened to her telling me about her school life as a child. This I am doing more often than before and am finding that there is so much I do not know about her, or about my family. But also this 'explains' some things about my family that I had wondered about, the different behaviors and such. She is like a book and lately she is the one I 'read' most. And considering that I am looking at mothering/hood, she has been a great library for my thoughts. (I do struggle with

rooting out certain things from her, because she says only what she wants to say at any given moment, and then when I am not expecting it, says the thing that I wanted to get out of her...patience and a fine tuned ear is what she will leave me with one day...sigh).

Reflective Journal 39

Looking back at the year it has interesting writing and mothering during the Covid-19 situation. Lockdown has re-defined mothering and has highlighted the usually marginalized spaces of mothering, in rural areas and in locations where social distancing is impossible because of the already congested living conditions. These were my thoughts as I assisted in home-schooling my children. How do you mother when confined to a small room with no possibility of going out? How does the black girl child at home all day live the relationship between her and her mother and mothering?

My writing has definitely benefited from the lockdown and I have had alone time to think deeply into the words I must write. The time spent inspecting one's own self in silence I have found valuable for writing and reflecting. I had minimal contact with people who are close to me and have been energised into memory work and conversation by these moments, enriching and provocative for my writing process.

M/other/red through reading

Works that have inspired creativity

Reflective Journal 5 week 9:

I have been reading Sandra Cisneros's *The House On Mango Street* for inspiration in my own writing. It's a beautiful little book and was Deon's suggestion for me. She is able to produce such beautiful lines as, "She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow". Not only do I relate to the line in many ways in my own life, I mostly love the sensitivity of it. The way is it describes how the sadness is sitting lets in deeper into the women's daily anguish by providing the image of window gazing. Her stories are short memory shots, packed with punchy lines such as the one I just mentioned, and sticking to the memory of the reader easily too. I took a lot from her writing for my own.

Reflective Journal 6 week 10:

One of my favorites again, poetry sessions with Robert Berold and Mangaliso Buzani. This week we engaged with a selection by Marike Beyers, and we will apparently be using this selection for her seminar next week. I love continuations of anything...this should be exciting. I was moved and troubled by some works, and found some funny and refreshing. I appreciated the form of the poem *Song With A Particular Movement*

by Federico Garcia Lorca after Robert had told us that he was also a great pianist. The way the words are placed in the poem look like two hands playing them like one would a piano. Lines like:

'a memory full of paths & anointings

a mouthful of ripe infant suns

seven legs for the dancing river & the clement abyss

& a hope that corroded the convulsions'

by Seithamo Motsapi in *River Robert* are moving and make one appreciate what it is to sit down and pen an emotional description of something or someone. I especially enjoyed *Ode to My Suit* by Pablo Neruda and Marina Tsvetaeva's *An attempt at Jealousy*.

Reflective Journal 6 week 11:

Poetry session. This week we did American poetry from the anthology *America A Prophecy*. I was taken by the emotion that the piece *History of the Nez Perce Indians from 1805 up to the Present Time 1880* by James Reuben evoked in the whole group. We agreed on its power and also the cleverness of its ability to stay in memory, which these types of poems are created to do in order for us to not forget that particular history. Sherwood Anderson's *The Man in the Brown Coat* was another of my favourites, and also getting to read the work of one of my favourite poets Sonia Sanchez's *on seeing pharaoh sanders blowing*. I am of the opinion that one needs to hear Sonia read her poetry herself, no one can do it justice like herself. Her words together with her voice are a feast for the ear.

Reflective Journal 14 week 15:

I have been spending some time with Federico Garcia Lorca *Selected Poems*, reading his sometimes-complicated poetry and trying to chew on his work. It's been a patient ride. I'm finding some of his work difficult to grasp in terms of meaning, but that can also be attributed to the fact that the pieces have been translated into English. Translations are difficult because sometimes a certain language does not fully address what has been meant in a piece of writing. There are some though that I got and liked like *Song Of The Barren Tree*:

'Woodcutter.

Cut my shadow from me.

Free me from the torment

of seeing myself without fruit' (Pg 67).

I loved it because of the unusualness of a conversation between a tree and a woodcutter, and then for the sadness that the tree displays. No one wants to look at themselves when they are not what they should be or want to be. It's a lovely stanza.

Reflective Journal 16 week 17:

The readings. I was pleased to see some examples of Mzi Mahola's work in the readings list we were given to read for the week. Mxolisi Nyezwa had suggested I look at some of his work for my own writing and I saw why he had done so. I love his way of storytelling within his poetry. I enjoy 'meeting' new poets and grappling with their work. For instance, I am completely blown away by Mzwandile Matiwane's work. His question still lingers in my head even as I now write:

'what are we? Poets, what are we for?'

I will write, going forward, with it in mind.

I love his *Prayer* and the vulnerability in his line 'Holy angels that I do not know'. For me it is an earnest man's plea, who isn't afraid to voice out his pain to unknown entities at a time of need. It is a short, to-the-point stanza that describes the extremity of his emotion. Similarly, I like *The Journey* and the intricate narration of his two worlds in the Muslim and Rastafarian life and the brutality and pain present in his poem *Mancane*. Mahola's work also took me to a place of memory and depth of thought of issues that circle our lives in general. His poems *Of Cause He Loves Me* and *Mine Must Be Final* really poked at my mind. In *Mine Must Be Final* he talks of being oriented in the facts of feminism and at the same time needs this new wife to be free to do as she pleases as long as she 'will enhance my status'. I found this curious and funny, because it is a conditional freedom. The idea of the woman not having to have the 'final word' is the kind of thing that leads to the woman in *Of Cause He Loves Me* to be in the predicament she was in...anyway...personal musings. What I like about his work is the portrayal of everyday life, a hitch-hiker, a dying relative, and how he is able to place the reader there at the scene. His delicate way of looking at dying and pain in *They Phoned* and *Old Age Centre* is astonishingly beautiful, I was there at that hospital room watching the uncle die. And then his short and sharp look at Western democracy made me read it over and over five times...because it is so well described in such simple short language!

Reflective Journal 17 week 18:

I am starting with the book *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women: An anthology of Stories* edited by Angela Carter. It has been on my list for a while and I have said repeatedly I will read this this week and then something else tickles my interest and I leave it lying expectantly on my desk. I have finally picked it up and what a delight. I always like reading from different authors in one book, it's lovely, like going through an exhibition catalogue. I love the excerpt from Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Plums*:

'After

Each shocking experience

Mother Earth recovers-

That, of course, is true,

But, with some effort

Battered as she is.

It is not bad if we help her

Some of the time'.

Not only because it speaks to my theme but I like the soft and earnest way it is worded. And such a beautiful truth too! I look forward to lazing around more with the book this week and seeing what it will nudge in me, or love in me.

: The poetry readings. Again I enjoyed the selection. Both selections from Pablo Neruda, *Ode To The Lemon* and *Ode To My Socks* are beautiful. The lemon one has short, colorful lines that capture the reader's senses and paints lovely, vivid images. Lines such as 'sodden with fragrance' and 'in the sweet-smelling house of the rind' inspire the reader to look differently at the lemon, with new eyes because something so simple and so 'everyday' has been made into a spectacle to see. The idea of what to expect when it is cut is amazing, 'a little cathedral', an imaginative way of talking about a lemon. And then the ending is spectacular! 'A diminutive fire of a planet'. I would have never thought it so until Neruda said it.

In Ode To My Socks he makes reading the poem make you feel the comfort the socks bring to him by beginning the poem with who made the socks and how they were made, 'she had knit with her own shepherd hands', which immediately lets you know how personal of a gesture the socks are, and special. I love how he 'resisted the sharp temptation to guard them the way schoolboys keep fireflies in a bottle'. Again this line emphasizes the socks' importance to him as personal objects and are precious and beautiful, because to equate them to captured fireflies by wide-eyed little schoolboys immediately gives you that feeling as a reader. Then he hits you with the 'moral' at the end, transporting his love for the socks to the reader so that they completely understand how amazing they are and they are his.

Federico Garcia Lorca's *The Six Strings* the whole poem is a painting, and to me it is also one that can be performed. Its implications of sound and movement, and the fact that it is packed with shockingly beautiful images like a guitar that 'makes dreams cry', are a theatre production of love. The guitar gets a mouth even, it has human qualities in its guitar-ness. It is a beautiful poem.

Reflective Journal 15 week 19:

I found myself thinking over *Life*, by Bessie Head in the book *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women* and how beautifully it is written with the many themes weaved together to create a story of a community and one woman and how she and they affect each other. The story reminded me a little of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, and how Morrison writes of Sula as the present evil that makes wives pay more attention to husbands and so on, the idea that her presence, even though perceived as negative, somehow enhanced the lives of others in that community. *Life* does this differently though, the previously undermined, the beer-drinking women, are welcome in her home even though she is the highly thought of Johannesburg girl. She changes the landscape of rural life and blaring music and people going in and out of her space is something unheard of. She even marries, when women like her are not supposed to as they are not the norm for such a virtuous life. I like Head's portrayal of everyday people in ordinary settings while discussing the intricacies of gender and class and the politics of life in even the marginalized places. The 'margins' are my favorite spaces from which to write, because the people who have raised me and have been raised with me come from them. Even with my mixture of influences whether in the rural or suburban life, I lean more towards those spaces. These kinds of stories by Head and Jolley bring out that side in me and sharpen the way I write.

I loved the *Beloved* excerpt as a poem because I had never thought of it as poem before. I love the book. In fact it has sent me into the direction of writing that I am pursuing now. I like the stream of consciousness in the piece, and because I know the book, I am familiar with the setting and have been moved by it for years. Toni Morrison personified slavery here, mashed up the thing into a person who is searching, through the horror of slavery's experiences. That the dialogue is childlike and scattered in thought also digs deep into the reader's emotional well, 'men without skin are making loud noises' and 'her sharp earrings are gone' speak of the trauma and uncertainty in the little child. Morrison is a magician. And her magic is found in her simple powerful lines like, 'Sethe is the face that lost me'.

I found this same but different kind of magic in Seithlamo Motsapi's *Earth* poem, whose language is so alive with beautifully descriptive images and a raw sadness that I shuddered at reading it.

'we left homes, herds...hearts to spite the hunger'.

I also found this beautiful sadness in Cesar Vallego's *To My Brother Miguel in Memorium* and Pablo Neruda's *Sad Song To Bore Everyone*. There is a delicate way of expressing loss and sadness without being too obvious about it. Such lines as:

'where you make a bottomless emptiness',

Make the reader see the person and their importance to the writer. The idea that the poem is a conversation with the person makes it scratch at the emotions even more, with the final two lines giving the reader the hint of old age creeping towards the writer. He speaks to his brother as if they were children again, and he is indeed hiding and

should come out. It is beautiful. In *Paris, in October 1939* he speaks of his impending departure from this earth through the city, clothing and shadows as if searching for proof that he was indeed alive here at this place with these things. His 'alibi'. He is thinking about his life and how he has lived it and sounds neither happy nor sad at its coming end in my opinion. Neruda sounds the same in his *Sad Song To Bore Everyone*, like he is pondering on the uselessness of it all, the earthly things, and yet the sadness of leaving them. Garcia Lorca's *Gacela Of The Flight* is also not too far from these in my thoughts. It is also sad in a way, but is in celebration of 'losing myself in the heart of certain children', he finds in this a 'death full of light to consume' him. I like that he is talking of 'certain children' and not all. These are specially, hence getting lost in them. Because loving and getting lost in people are different levels of being affected.

Reflective Journal 16 week 20:

Having gone through some of the poetry in anticipation, I found some lovely gems that make me even more keen.

'Oh time when my sorrows

had good tears,

and were like well water

that irrigates a garden!

Today they are torrential rains

that snatch mud from the earth!', *Yesterday My Sorrows Were* by Antonio Machado.

I found this so beautifully accurate in my own life as well...I saw it as I sometimes see my life when I am having those defeated moments...I lament on the days when my little worries sorted themselves out and how now, with the passage of time, they have become hunchbacked monsters that sometimes sit too comfortably on my already tired shoulders. I loved the poem. The image of the rain snatching mud from the earth is so powerful.

I also liked *There Are Free Voices* [*Hay voces libre*], not because I fully understood it, but because there are some lines that made me stop and stare:

'men who bleed against dreams

And drums that rush onto the street without a murmur'

and...

'there are men who rest unrepentant against sleep

And drums that collapse on the cobbles without murmur'.

From *The Good Angel*, by Rafael Alberti: 'That one who tied silence to his hair',

and Robert Bly's poem *Landscape with Two Graves and an Assyrian Hound*. All these I want to hear what the group has to say about them because I am finding it hard to pinpoint what it is that draws me to them. Poetry does this. It can affect you and you don't even know how or why. The words just smack you and you stumble around trying to find other words to describe what its words did to you...its amazing.

Reflective Journal 17 week 21:

Bessie Head's book is definately a slow read...she writes so knowingly and spares no detail unsaid in the whole narrative, and you have to put it down and breath every now and then. Its also on some level triggering, hense the having to breath, and overwhelmingly sad and so true in some of its ponderings:

' Power people needed small, narrow, shut-in worlds. They never felt secure in the big, wide flexible universe where there were too many cross-currents of opposing thought', Head.

There is also another moment in the book that resonated with me. Often we did not understand, my friends and myself growing up, the constant anger our male parents were carrying around with them until you go to work with them one day, they were all factory workers, and you hear white men address them as boys. Even young white boys, and you as a child are confused because at home this guy is the king...an angry king whom you tiptoe around in order to not spark any ugly flare up...

"An African man gave her the most reasonable explanation: 'How can a man be a man when he is called a boy? I can barely retain my own manhood. I was walking down the road the other day with my girl, and the Boer policeman said to me: 'Hey boy, where's your pass?' Am I a man to my girl or a boy? Another man addresses me as a boy. How do you think I feel?"

How indeed?

Reflective Journal 19 week 23:

I am finished with Sandra Cisneros's *Women Hollering Creek*. I kept reading it and putting it away even though I love it so much. Cisneros's work is amazing. She writes with such sincerity, such care and intimacy, her characters are also recognizable and real in the way that she presents them. I love that her work is poetic and political without shouting it out loud. I love that she deals with the unspoken, she gives voice to the marginalized. For example one of my favorite little stories in the book is the one called *Salvador Late And Early*. Salvador lives inside my heart now, because of the way Cisneros gave him to me:

'Salvador inside that wrinkled shirt, inside the throat that must clear itself and apologize each time it speaks, inside that forty pound body of boy with its geography of scars, its history of hurt,...inside that body too small to contain the hundred balloons of happiness, the single guitar of grief, is a boy like any other disappearing out the door, beside the schoolyard gate, where he has told his brothers they must wait'.

Reflective Journal 19 week 23:

The poetry readings for the week are interesting. First off I loved and was drawn to Mairead Byrne's *Life Is Too Easy*. The poem really got under my skin. It begins in this mundane way, the things we do daily, weekly, and the cycle of them, the ease with which we cruise through them...and then the last part of it, 'I am a two year old carrying water'...the care with which she writes about the uneasiness of life next to the easiness of it makes you really think...I went to search her...and found interviews. I like these because you kind of get to have a virtual 'coffee' with the writer without them even knowing, and finding out about their work and how they write...what they are thinking about while writing. I loved when she said:

'I am interested in silence, in shades of meaning; poems that are actually three poems; small poems that are large; language that lies on the surface of meaning'

I will definitely be looking at her work. I am sure I have come across it before though. I also loved Pablo Neruda's *Here I Love You* and its beautiful lines that have such amazing imagery you want to gasp out loud:

'in the dark pines the wind disentangles itself'.

I enjoyed Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese's *Portrait of a Mother and Indiscretion*, I have to think about why.

Mzwandile Matiwana's *I am Still Searching* I also loved for the beauty and honesty in his words:

'riding the saddle of my pen

Searching still

For the poem

That traces the marrow

From the bones of the past'.

Reflective Journal 20 week 24:

The poetry readings are interesting also this week. There are beautiful lines and images that have stuck with me, like Ilya Kaminsky's

'thank you for my deafness, Lord, such fire from a match you never lit'.

I loved the beauty and sensitivity in the poem *Sea Church* by Aimee Nezhukumatathil and the chaos and precision in Angifi Dladla's *Son of Dukathole*. His portrayal of the place and its people is beautifully displayed and the images and sounds are astonishing. For me it plays out like a well-directed film with so many bits that can be taken in so many directions by other storytellers:

'ghetto blasters blaring away poverty', and

'children here have a group soul and compound eyes'.

I loved how the pieces affected me in different ways, like Kaminsky's writings on his brother and Sonya. They become so real to the reader because of the way he gives them attention and is specific about delicate memory moments. They are well written.

4. Poetics Essay

Reflecting on Writing as a Witness.

From the 23rd to the 27th of March 2020 we were engaged in a week of Poetics of the World with Paul Wessels. From the seminar we read and discussed essays and essay writing and wrote our own essays on what writing means to us, like the writers whose essays we delved into, what is the essence of our writings? After many reservations and self-doubt I began to peel through my layers and earnestly write my poetics essay.

Writing as a Witness Through 'Listening': Constructing New Realities Through a Re-membling of History and a Re-modeling of ancient Ideas

'We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone', Alice Walker.

'You have been driving in the car, a man pointing a gun at your head, and now he has left the car and you are free. Everything around you has gone strange. You are no longer in the same world you were in before the gun bruised your temple. You have the suspicion that you are no longer yourself. Now, now that you are free (if it really is you), the question is, How do you make sense of your life?' Brian Evenson.

Writing is an experience. It is very similar to being possessed by a thing that turns your thoughts into words on paper. Your body regurgitates a feeling that it had most probably experienced before or watched someone else experience it. The heart and the mind both fight fiercely over it, both wanting to handle it like a rubric tube and twist it and turn it to their will, and finally, when they have invited your body to participate, there the experience becomes a physical 'thing'. A piece of writing.

It is an experience for me because I mostly write from a site of pain, and not pleasure. I write from difficult baggage carried over years, and the act of writing allows me to make sense of the little acts that have over the years become this baggage. I have always written, on paper, and the walls behind my grandmother's house and in my mind when I could not yet produce alphabets. Writing was, and still is a way to organize life so that I can understand it. In the same way that stories were told to little children around fires on quiet evenings. To make the world make sense to them.

When I was a little girl, I listened better than I could talk. I spent time absorbing the sound that a thing made more than the thing itself, the sound of the soles of feet coming into contact with puddles when running on rainy days, the wind against the circular movement of a skipping rope, boiling water, breathing. And so when listening to the fireside storytelling sessions, which I am glad to have been alive when this tradition was still in existence even if it was in its dying stages, it is these small things that I searched for because this is how the world was made real to me. Fairy tales, or *intsomi* in my language, were full of sound. Singing, words strung together so intricately they felt like music. Clapping of hands, the swaying of the body to mimic and embody the event inside the story. The pieces that made the fairy tale exist even in its non-existence.

'There were once two little girls. Their mother, realizing that they had grown enough to be taught how to walk through the bushes to the other village on the other side of the forest, gave them an errand to run for their grandmother. Before they left, she gave them strict instruction not to turn left at the fork in the road when it appears, but to turn right. The girls set off on their journey. Having forgotten which way their mother had told them to turn, they agreed to try the left turn of the road and off they went. It became dark and they became scared they would meet all kinds of scary things that lurk in the night. When they spotted a house, they went inside to seek shelter from the dark night.

A little girl greeted them at the door and told them they could stay, provided they hide from her mother because she is Nomahamle, the Zim and she eats children. The children agreed.

When Nomahamle arrived, bringing her daughter the meat of a rabbit for her supper, she smelled the blood of the girls immediately and chased them into the forest. They became so exhausted from running that they climbed up a tall tree for safety. Nomahamle could not climb trees so she fetched her axe and began to chop the tree down. Just when the tree was about to fall, a small bird flew in and sat on a branch and began to sing:

'Ntengu ntengu macetyana, haz' ba abantwana babantu benzenina!

Mthi yhima gomololo!

And the tree stood back up firm. After many attempts, Nomahamle became tired and left the girls to sleep at her home. The children climbed down and proceeded in the direction their mother had given them and reached their grandmother's home.

This was one of my favorite fairy tale as a child. I saw the fork in the road, the afternoon sun bathing their brown bodies, the magic of the open fields and bushes which I knew from experience, would make you forget where you were going and seduce you with berries and wild rabbits darting about. The pressure of tree bark against your bare soles when hiding up a tree, the sound of an axe against the body of a tree, splinters flying all around it. The questions whirling around my little brain about the story lead me to question, interrogate, agonize about details in the story long after it had been told. Things like the burden of Nomahamle's daughter, who lives with a murderous mother

but she herself having genuine compassion for humans. Why did Nomahamle lust after the meat of human girls when she loved her own daughter enough to bring her rabbit meat instead of humans for supper? How old must you be to be released into the dangerous world of monsters and bears to encourage you to fend for yourself? Who is the bird? What does he or she represent?

Stories gave me the ears to listen to and to question experience. Listening to experience gave the tools to speak out the unspeakable, the questions, to remember and reconstruct the past through these questions to make sense of the presence. *Intsomi* performed a similar role for children. Even though many stories were told to warn children against disobedience and laziness, many were also told to preserve history and explain complex situations that children found themselves in but were unable to comprehend. Stories therefore performed teachable moments that provided the needs of the child holistically. Therefore, the first lesson a child received was the gift of listening. Before I was able to use language to interpret my world, I learned to be still and listen. At first to be able to re-tell the story and to do so even better than my grandmother. Gradually I began to notice how children who grew up in other places far from my grandmother's village knew of the same stories I was told. The same historical events articulated for them in epic tales, heroes praised in poetry and family lineages recited in both poetry and song to imprint their narratives in memory for a lifetime. I cut my teeth to the collective memory of blackness through sound. Literature came to me through listening first and then questioning. This way I absorbed the art of recording the experience of black life. I wanted to become a witness.

Imagination became my first tool in attempting to interpret the world around me. I had learned from my elders how to preserve an experience for the next generation, so that they learn from it. Like bell hooks who explains in her essay *Narratives of Struggle*:

'I chose to be a writer in my girlhood because books rescued me. They were the places where I could bring the broken bits and pieces of myself and put them together again, the places where I could dream about alternative realities, possible futures. They let me know firsthand that if the mind was to be the site of resistance, only the imagination could make it so. To imagine, then, was a way to begin the process of transforming reality. All that we cannot imagine will never come into being' (hooks, 1991).

Oral literature was what molded this imagination, and like Lesego Rampolokeng I first encountered it in my home.

'For instance my grandmother, when she was in some kind of excited state, moved to anger or joy or whatever, would rattle out some lines that would put a number of people today going as poets to shame' (1999).

Similarly, Craig Santos Perez shares the same kind of sentiment for orality in literature:

'oral poetry was an integral, everyday part of ancestral Chamoru life. Poetry was valued because it was an essential vessel of indigenous knowledge, religion, history, politics, culture, education, and entertainment' (...).

The way I think about writing is amalgamation of all these forms of literature. The freedom with which words were allowed to flow between reality and magic, history through imagination and images and sound was the staple diet for the feeding of my young mind. When attempting to write then of complicated subjects, the use of fairy tales can add depth to the meaning of the piece, and a sense of mystery on the subject that pulls the reader in for more. The perfect style, I think, for writing the collective memory of pain and struggle in marginalized communities. Because as Kate Bernheimer reflects:

'to learn the history of fairy tales is to learn the history of myth, printing, childhood, literacy, violence, loss, psychology, class, illustration, authorship, ecology, gender, and more' (...).

Learning this history lends us as writers the ability to use our imaginations to conjure up testimonies of the present world we live in for the future, using inspiration from the past. Bell hooks quotes James Cone in articulating this idea, bringing up the memory of the fireside tales told to us when we were children, 'the purpose of testimony is not only to strengthen an individual's faith but also to build the faith of the community', further inviting the writer to 'rejoice in the power of community, because it renews our hope, intensifies awareness, and invites us to imagine together' (1991).

Toni Morrison who through her book *Beloved*, uses the same kind of imagination to tell of the pain of black life during slavery by bringing up the spirit of a dead child as the personification of slavery, asking questions about motherhood and love in a space filled with hate, and raising spiritually and emotionally sound children in a violent environment that renders their race inferior and ugly. Or Zadie Smith in her book *Swing Time*, who speaks of growing up bi-racial and complexities of it by embodying two little girls burdened with race and class issues, taking the reader through their lives as they develop. Smith uses simple child-like experiences like tap dance classes and pop stars to place in the lives of the girls, and yet the same images are used to describe painful events. Their love for Michael Jackson is also marred by the lie Tracey tells about her absent father being one of Jackson's backup dancers. They both know it is not true but accommodate the lie so that Tracy copes with her father not being there. The use of child-like or childhood experiences to communicate trauma, much like in most fairy tales. All this attests to the use of imagination and the ordinary to question, in order to construct a new reality.

The ability to use writing to question that I learned from those earlier stories like *Nomahamle* and the girls inspired me to work in the same way that these two writers work. Creative ways of doing what bell hooks suggested, to imagine in order to realize new existences as communities who come from struggle.

Experimentation is ultimately the vehicle that will lead to this kind of writing. I can imagine that first person who came up with the story of *Nomahamle*. How did she get there? (and I say she because it is mostly the grandmother who creates these elaborate narratives in order to teach). Like Anne Lauterbach, she must have thought of experimentation as 'a willingness to adapt to contexts, in order to derive not so much

new meanings as new ways of interpreting the unpredictable' (2010). And this may take some time, years, in order to get to these new ways of interpreting the unpredictable. Experimentation, as I understand it, comes from a desire to disrupt to create anew. A need to explain things by using by stepping away, even slightly, from conventionality, and throwing yourself into the new. How do you engage with questioning the complexities of motherhood? By creating a character who loves her daughter but has an insatiable appetite for human girls. This kind of narrative shocks the system, and disrupts normal thought patterns, forcing a new kind of thinking. A questioning.

I like Brian Evenson's take on this idea of disruption, when he says he believes that 'you have to make some effort to depict a surface before you disrupt it if you are to get the readers to experience that disruption in more than just an intellectual way. It is engaged in an intense and motivated critique of systems that create value and meaning and is interested in destabilizing those systems so as to complicate our relation to them permanently once we have put the book down' (...). Within the fairy tale, or the writing of the ordinary to question, lies this disruption. The inner world of the child used to discuss the behavior of adults, or the use of magic in ordinary everyday settings to bring about new thought. Listening then, is the initial stage of the ability to create this disruption.

'The poem springs from the half-spoken words of such patients as the physician sees from day to day. He observes it in the peculiar, actual conformations in which its life is hidden. Humbly he presents himself before it, and by long practice he strives as best he can to interpret the manner of its speech. In that the secret lies. This, in the end, comes perhaps to be the occupation of the physician after a lifetime of careful listening' (Williams, 1951).

The power of listening, slow listening, results in being able to do what Williams has observed, the privilege of knowing how to understand so that you can testify. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie demonstrates this in her book *Half of a Yellow sun*. In interviews she gives about her process in writing the book she admits to having spent years listening to her elders in finding ways to speak of the way that war changes the lives of ordinary people, but also how to write love in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. In one scene she paints for us the picture of a mother who has lost a daughter, and how another character learns of the deep pain of loss through her:

'She opened the calabash. "Take a look" she said again. Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl's head with the ashy-gray skin and the braided hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed. The woman closed the calabash. "Do you know," she said, "it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair". The train had stopped with a rusty screech. Olanna got down and stood in the jostling crowd. A woman fainted...She thought about the hair resting in the calabash. She visualized the mother braiding it, her fingers oiling it with pomade before dividing it into sections with a wooden comb' (Adichie, 2006).

Listening conjures up these kinds of images. And not just listening to the story but listening to the unnamed detail within the story or experience. Adichie demonstrates this kind of slow listening in her visualizing of the hair being braided and parted with a wooden comb. This image speaks about an overwhelming kind of love that only a mother can experience. The writer had no doubt conducted many interviews with the people who had experienced the war, but this kind of detail comes from studying the person's experience through body language, gestures and normal conversations about ordinary everyday things. And this studying takes time. Slow listening. To be a witness to the experiences of others, yourself included, there is a patience involved that demands more than time. The 'long practice' that William Carlos Williams is speaking of.

Of course, all this comes with a possession of a certain 'madness'. A need that consumes one to get the raging absurdity out of one's head and onto paper. What is this insanity that drives the writer to hours on end of sitting on a chair and punching furiously away at the keyboard that will eventually yield the result of the folly, a piece of writing. Federico Garcia Lorca calls it the *duende*, Mxolisi Nyezwa, quoting Simphiwe Nolutshungu, calls it *inkenke*.

'it is a force not a labour, a struggle not a thought...it's not a question of skill, but of a style that's truly alive: meaning, it's in the veins: meaning, it's of the most ancient culture of immediate creation' (...),

Or as Mxolisi Nyezwa explains it through the Maskandi artist quoting Simphiwe Nolutshungu:

'a power that lives in a person in a form of a spirit' (2015).

This possession, or madness, is the last ingredient that I believe the writer must possess. As Dambudzo Marechera claims, 'the writer is no longer a person: he has to die in order to become a writer' (...), similar to Mxolisi Nyezwa's artist 'aim[ing] for the disruption of the senses, for war, as he is a roving character, an unhappy bandit' (2015). Possession is the fuel that pushes the art of the artist forward. It a force that 'burns the blood like powdered glass, that exhausts, rejects all the sweet geometry we understand, that it shatters styles and makes Goya, master of the grays, silvers and pinks of the finest English art, paint with his knees and fists in terrible bitumen blacks, or strips Mossen Cinto Verdaguer stark naked in the cold of the Pyrenees, or sends Jorge Manrique to wait for death in the wastes of Ocana, or clothes Rimbaud's delicate body in a saltimbanque's costume, or gives Comte de Lautreamont the eyes of a dead fish, at dawn, on the boulevard' (Garcia Lorca, ...).

Storyteller Nongenile Masithathu Zenani must have been possessed as suggested by Lorca, to have produced such extreme power and passion in her performance of story that a single story could last for days, twisting and turning and manipulating events and situations in such extravagant ways that both delights and astounds listeners at the same time. She and Nopiani Gxavu were storytellers who were recorded by a Professor Herold Scheub who was interested in the intricacies of storytelling from South Africa. Her foresight in asking the professor to bring the stories back to South Africa after

liberation from apartheid speaks to the commitment to the collective memory of a people that they possessed even though illiterate according to western ways of thinking, and uneducated (again according to western ways of thinking about education). The passion comes from a need to preserve, and to say out loud the thing that is not said out loud. To store away in the historical archive of the mind the thing that deprived, oppressed and violated the natural order of a people. The 'madness' compels us as writers to write like the possessed, directed by spirit.

Of what then do I think we should write? I write about the thing that matters to me. Like Philip Zhuwao (1996), I am interested in myself. But unlike Zhuwao, I am also interested in myself as an extension of others. Of my people. Of my grandmother, my great-grandmother, my mother and my cousins. I am also an extension of the 1800's missionary converts, *amagqhobhoka*, of the farm laborer, domestic workers, garden 'boys', street vendors, teachers and nurses. Like Bettina Judd, 'I write about race for the same reason people write about God, or nature, or their mother's wedding dress. It is my presence of mind and memory' (...). And not because it is the African thing to do, to write about Africa and the idea of being pigeonholed as Taiye Selasi so eloquently puts it in her essay *Stop Pigeonholing African Writers*. Being a witness is much more than writing blackness because you are black and are therefore compelled to. It is closer to a calling than a duty.

It is an act that finally puts to rest the restlessness of the pain that roams around the yards of black people today. Toni Morrison understands this need for the rest of the restlessness. In *Beloved* she put it down on paper.

'She wished for Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying, "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield' (1987).

I write poetry. I write stories in the form of poetry. I write poetry derived from the history of an oppressed people. I write stories that explain the present nature of my people to my people. I write for my people, and others who are interested. I write, like Lidia Yuknavitch, for 'that moment when the reader is holding an actual book in their hands and they can feel their skin differently. Their heart beating. Their torso, their face, the place where their very sex sits. An alive body inside language' (...). I write from a listening that allows for the reader's body to experience, like I did when I sat in front of my grandmother, drunk with the eagerness to absorb, to interpret, to learn from and to learn the art of questioning. I sat and received the magical wand to make possible a new kind of seeing, reconstruct and remodel a new way of being, and to realize the mandate to give voice to the people beyond my time. This has enabled me to see poetry as a portal into the complicated world of memory through story.

I will refer to Yuknavitch again on the mission as writers:

'to bring the delicate dream to the tips of words, to kiss them, to rest your cheek on them, to open your mouth and breathe body to body – to resuscitate corporeal selves.

And if there is consuming going on, it's not about money; it's a reader wanting to take a book I wrote and maybe put it in their mouth or rest it on their chest or take it into the sea with them' (...).

If one can take readers to this height of consumption, I feel they have done their job as artists. If equally, one can bring along their wounded, suffering, deprived communities into this portal of healing through their work, they have probably succeeded in entering the world of the mad, they have *inkenqe*, the *duende*. They have listened. Slowly. They have felt between the lines of the ancient voices that live inside the *duende* and they have headed the call. They are a witness. Not just for themselves or the people they are writing for, but for the unknown future. The ones who will in turn, just like us in our generation look back to be able to walk forward. The artists and writers who will shape the new possibilities of our distant future and speak new languages.

'Poetry is not only a dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before', Audre Lorde.

5. My Writing Mothers: *Book Reviews*

My research on book reviewing was enriching. I had always underestimated the work that goes into putting down one's views on what a book is about and how effective it is in what it was trying to achieve. The library was a good resource, I went with fellow writer Mxolisi Radebe and we tried to find our voices in the reviews we found there, shared online book review sites and spoke of ways of approaching our own.

I chose Tadeusz Rosewicz's *Mother Departs* because of the theme of mothering and tracing memory. I particularly enjoyed the way it was compiled into poems, anecdotes, vivid memories and family contributions. I also chose Sandra Cisneros's *Women Hollering Creek and Other Stories* again because of the theme and the poetic and detailed anecdotes that constructed the lives of the women she grew up around.

***Mother Departs* by Tadeusz Rozewicz: A Book Review**

Mother Departs is a collection of writings by Tadeusz Rozewicz consisting of 39 pieces, a collage of writings by himself, his mother and his two brothers. It is a tribute to his mother, Stephania Rozewicz, who passed away in 1957, and is a beautifully constructed story of love, loss and grief, stitched together in memories of childhood and the last days of a beloved mother.

Apart from being a poet, Rozewicz collaborated with his brothers in theatre and film, and this is evident in this collection, the arrangement of the writings into a narrative that constructs a detailed account of a family, a father and three sons, through the memory of a mother in vivid images that represent different stages of her life throughout the book. He uses a scrapbook approach in the arrangement of the pieces, beginning with his retrospective thoughts on his mother as an older man, to the life of his mother through her own words and then a collection of poetry, diary entries and his brothers' memories in writing. Rozewicz takes the reader on a journey, as if walking through an art museum, in scenes of his childhood, preserving, presenting and arranging personal and family history in acknowledging the one family member that was the glue that kept it all intact, his mother.

The book has a melancholic and nostalgic tone, with Rozewicz re-imagining his mother through events like the persecution of Jewish people by the Nazis which led his sons to enlist in the army. It also chronicles the political upheaval that subsequently took the life of her first son, Janusz Rozewicz, who 'haunts *Mother Departs*: his execution, its unspoken effects on the family, and later the ugly, unjust inevitability of Stephania's own death from cancer in a sweltering industrial city in People's Poland'. It is a conversation with a departed loved one, reflecting on things that were never said but should have been said, and promises made which were never realized. For instance, years after the death of his mother he speaks to her of his occupation as if she is there with him witnessing his work, 'I can tell it only to you in my old age, and I can tell you now because I'm already older than you...I didn't dare tell you when you were alive. I am a Poet'. In another instance he expresses his regrets,

'For years I used to promise my Mum three things: that I'd invite her to Krakow, that I'd show her Zakopane and the mountains, and that I'd take her to the seaside...I didn't keep my promises' (Pg 4).

He also expresses the yearning for his mother by 'listening' to her voice as she tells the story of her life in the chapter *the village of my childhood*, and then records her last years through diary entries of hospital visits and graphic images of her slow decent into death through disease and pain. In the middle of the book he builds an image of her through a series of poems, immortalizing her.

His poetry and diary entries carry the intimate details of memory, longing and an unfolding of a life delicately narrated in thoughtful musings described in household objects and references to nature and religious belief.

'through an open door
I see the landscape of childhood
a kitchen with a blue kettle
the heart of Jesus in a crown of thorns
mother's translucent shadow' (Pg 58).

Simple language and short crisp sentences not only tell you the story but also paint vivid pictures for the reader as in the above extract from *door*. He has little use for punctuation which leads the works to a feeling of continuous thought. He is careful and precise in his separation of stanzas, at times isolating significant sentences for the reader to linger on, but mostly short thoughtful stanzas. His clever and unusual word pairings like 'blemished light' and 'dead cherubs' add an unease and the bit of darkness that almost always accompanies grief. There is a play with sound and memory too in beautiful lines like:

'in the round silence
a cock crows'.

Similarly, in the diary extracts from *gliwice diary*, one can 'hear' his anguish as he watches his mother pass, again in the simplicity with which he presents his pain and love for his mother.

'Mother is dying day by day. They pump strangers' blood into her. She's lain there for weeks. She must be afraid of death?...I touch her little bones wrapped in skin. And I feel like...escaping. But what matters is not what I feel but what I do – I stay in the city, (Pg 88).

Not only is he processing his own pain but his mother's as well. He does this also by adding the memories of his brothers Janusz and Stanislaw in the book, in the chapters towards the end of it *the way home from school (a fragment from a letter)* (Pg 119) and *in the kaleidoscope* (Pg 125). This enables the reader to see his mother from many other angles and illustrates her contributions to her children's lives individually.

I enjoyed the collection because of its open and personal encounter with grief. The language that is used to unearth and re-imagine the person that gave the author life, the images he uses to conjure her up for the reader and the well-arranged narratives that take the reader through her life are exquisite. Rozewicz describes parenting and being parented during times of uncertainty, war and social injustices, and does so with the inquisitive eye of a small child and the lamentations of an adult man approaching his old age. The book is a story of a family told through multiple genres and yet all expressed in a poetic manner. It weaves through the lives of each family member, isolating important and meaningful events in beautiful images. Without fear, he works through the ugliness of a slow death, but also, with a lump in his literary throat, describes the beauty of motherhood.

***Women Hollering Creek and Other Stories* by Sandra Cisneros: A Book Review**

bell hooks referred to marginalized spaces as more than a site of deprivation but as a "site of radical possibility, a space of resistance...a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist, it offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds". In her collection of stories *Women Hollering Creek*, Sandra Cisneros demonstrates hooks's notion, not only by highlighting the lives of a people that would not, under normal circumstances except as a study of the not-so-privileged, but also giving them the center stage in literature and allowing them to come as they are. There are ways in which writers write about the places they know or come from where they are often careful to include the reader by ensuring an understanding of the place and its people, resulting in an over-explained narrative, as if the people and the place needs to be held up against the dominant culture in order to be able to be heard. Cisneros's deliberate staying away from this kind of presentation is evident in this collection, instead she shows a sensitivity in her portrayals of the specificities or particularities of that community honestly and

.....

The book comprises of a collection of vignettes that explore femininity and community and delves deep and beautifully into the lives of Hispanic women's identities and the complexities of their lives both humorously and sorrowfully. The stories are short and richly infused with color and energy and because of this one can see the characters through their own eyes. The streets, homes and corners where vendors sell their goods are vividly and brilliantly painted so that the reader is placed inside each scene and is able to relate even as an outsider.

All the narratives occur in a small Texan town called *Women Hollering Creek*, named after a grieving mother who drowned her baby and is now said to be haunting the creek in which she drowned it, crying for her child. Cisneros poetically uses the place's name as the title of the book precisely because of what she is speaking of and in terms of its content. The women's stories tell of a town full of women who are grieving in many ways and are therefore silently 'hollering' in their own private spaces as they live their daily lives. From little girls to married women who grieve their youth and untethered states of being, she is able to reach into the very bottom of an experience and bring it up with all its layers intact. The town feels to the reader, like its cupped hands contain all these lived performances of a people who live in a place that is theirs but isn't, their experiences split into two, one foot here and the other placed firmly or tentatively in the place where their ancestors come from. There is a double consciousness evident in all that they do and Cisneros makes sure that the reader sees and acknowledges this as a necessary truth worth knowing.

There are pieces with such lovely insights like *Mericans* and *Little Miracles, Kept Promises*. Cisneros not only tells the story of a people here, she also brings to light issues that these communities face daily like their state of 'otherness'. In *Mericans*, the

woman photographing the Mexican children is surprised when they speak to each other in English. They ironically reply casually that they are American, even though they are seen as 'other' than Americans. The little notes of thanks and pleas that she constructs an identity of a community in *Little Miracles, Kept Promises* is astonishingly beautiful. It is personal and gives the reader a gateway into the hearts and souls of the people of this community.

Memory as Mothering the Body: *Brute* by Emily Skaja

A Book Review

According to the dictionary, 'brute' refers to "a savagely violent person or an animal" or "an animal as opposed to a human being". The use of the word as a title for a poetry collection, speaks volumes to the content of the entire offering. To be considered a 'brute' one must possess a certain kind of violence that penetrates the very soul of any human being. Emily Skaja's work speaks to and from the everyday experiences of a woman/girl with such skill in its discussion of the various themes and concepts that she cautiously and violently lets the reader into her pain and her wonder at things unsaid.

She divided the work up into four chapters that stunningly follow each other in a beautiful sequence and dance together in telling a tale in letters, elegies and tiny stories: *My History As, Girl Saints, Circle and Bright Landscape*. Within these four language spaces, some stories burst out between the lines and demand to be told. She digs into the hidden places of the reader's body and awakens in them the senses that have been silent to the quiet predicaments of the life of a woman and disturb the usual. She wants to reach these places that readers are too afraid to leap to in acknowledgement. From the images of little girls lost, "that witch girl unafraid of anything" to "starved girls folded at a line from Leviticus", Skaja's language penetrates the depth of the 'problem' using images that sew together experiences and memory with colour and familiarity. There is the clarity with which she expresses her concerns. It is one that is simple in its deliverance and displays inner thought processes that come out in dreamlike states, wielding their weapons across the page in creative structures that assist the storytelling form. In *NO, I DO NOT WANT TO CONNECT WITH YOU ON LINKEDIN* there are line breaks that give the story unfolding time to settle in the reader's mind and allow a single thought at a time to fester into the skin so that it lingers. And then there are blocks of words pushed together with no breathing space, like *ELEGY WITH RABBITS* and *[EURYDICE]*, where thoughts and questions are rambled out as if the writer is afraid they will leave before they climb out of his/her mouth. This communicates an urgency to liberate these thoughts so that they sit untampered but remain certain. Skaja's liberty with the placing of words on a page, together with the confidence connecting her reader to her images, is astounding. There is an energy in her work that requires one to be still and listen.

I loved her *Elegy For R.* as grief is not an easy thing to talk about because of the feelings associated with it. Absence is like air, hard to describe even though it is there. Here

she goes where there is absence and constructs something that feels the way she does about R. There's a melancholic love that hovers over the words spread downwards in a thin line as if they are a stream pouring down. It came across as a memory resurfaced and rewatered. I also loved *Aubade With Attention To Pathos III* with such lovely lines as:

"What is this impulse in me to worship and crucify anyone who leaves me...history is a practice of ignoring things and hoping for the best, you can drive yourself crazy looking".

I love questions and out of the blue statements in poetry because they allow the reader to wonder with the writer, that way the writer is holding the reader by the hand and guiding her/him along into the magical land of meaningful words jumbled together to try to say the sometimes unsayable. In *My History As*, she delivers lines that stand out and demand the reader's attention. Those that make you stop and require that you look closer, to see yourself possibly knitted there inside of them:

"Meanwhile I had a passion for cartography. Not leaving, just colouring the maps".

Colourful lines like this one are powerful in their frankness. They vividly describe hesitation and a feeling of being stuck to one place that one is shocked into a vulnerability that has existed for a long while unseen.

Emily Skaja possesses a voice that clears the rooms within our souls and refurnishes our thinking so that we may dance with her memories and see ourselves in them. Her commitment to her narrative is evident throughout the book. She is not hurried in her storytelling but helps the reader to chew through the words in wonder, amusement and heartbreak. I am altogether pleased and hurt by the collection, its honesty and connection to its reader speak to what writers are to society. Witnesses.

**To Mother A Nation: *The Collected Poems Of June Jordan: Directed By Desire*, edited by Jan Heller and Sarah Miles.
A Book Review.**

*"These poems
they are things that I do
in the dark
reaching for you
whoever you are
and
are you ready?", June Jordan.*

June Jordan is one of those black women poets who make words seem effortless in the weight that they carry. Born in a time when her race and gender were and still are lessened and disgraced as insignificant and unseen, she rose as a writer who speaks as if etching pictures into the chests of readers in protest, love and care. Her work is a testament to a pedagogical embrace that feeds its students from its well of experience and pain to liberate in mind and spirit.

In a letter that she penned to June Jordan ten years after her death, Alice Walkers described Jordan's work in words that if as she had been gone for so long, painted an image of her a warrior whose weapons were ink. "I see the passion of your clear intent to send your words, like slashes of pure light, to illuminate the dark corridors of collusion and complicity that made war and crimes against humanity so banal that the average American, rushing to school or a job, felt too befuddled to investigate". And I agree. Jordan's poetry is a hug and gentle tug on the shoulders of the black child and a scream into the deafened ears of both the oppressors and the oppressed. Her words come adorned with love but also scarred with the burden of blackness and what it means both in her time and today.

More than being talented at putting words together, she has been able to arrange them so that we can hear her voice in them and we absorb her content as comfort, joy and anger in the different pieces she produces. In her work, she engages with more than just the self and her loved ones, she talks to and at her people in calling for a good look at who they are. Pieces like *On The Black Poet Reading His Poem At The Park* show the softer side of her, where she writes in a romantic way about black life with tenderness, her last line so beautiful in its repetition. She does this even in the shape of the poem on the page, triangular and going down, looking like the way you would sing this scene, from a high note to a low hum, "comes and comes and comes and comes". Her ease of use of punctuation and line breaks, to either shock or invite the reader to take a breath and listen, is one that lets one know of the length of time she has spent writing and the care with which the selection of her words shines through.

And yet she can be forthright, intense, and questioning is demonstrated beautifully in the poem *Okay "Negroes"*, where she states with a directness that "God is vague and he doesn't take no sides" concerning the Negro.

I was particularly struck by the foreword in the book by Adrienne Rich of Jordan and her works:

"she believed that an up-from-the-bottom revolution must include art, laughter, sensual pleasure...she described/defined poems as 'voiceprints of language'...hers are back and forth between manifestos and love lyrics, jazz poetry and sonnets, reportage (when the witness takes a stand) and murmured lust, 'spoken word' and meditative solos, with mood-shifts and image-juxtapositions to match".

The idea that poetry is more than just beautiful words strung together, that it can be an 'up-from-the-bottom revolution' is stunningly loud and true of hers and her peers in the use of their works to influence a change in thinking and facilitate a vehicle in which the

black voice can be heard, and the black body can be seen. In 1882 a Xhosa man wrote a letter to his people and published it in the isiXhosa newspaper Isigidimi SamaXhosa where he pointedly and earnestly implored them to:

"Grab a pen, load it with ink, sit in your chair...fire with your pen. Press on the page, engage your mind, focus on facts, and speak loud and clear, don't rush into battle. Anger talks with a stutter".

The man was Isaac Williams Wauchope, a teacher, minister and prolific writer, who straddled both the European and his native Xhosa heritage, labouring to find strategies to bring his people up and out of the confusion and despair that engulfed their ways of being and into a new possibility that only they could envision and build. I see a similarity in his words in the work of June Jordan. "An up-from-the-bottom revolution". Her pen rages in war but also wades in the still waters of shame, guilt and anger. She speaks with the authority that black men and women already asserted in the nineteenth century and then enhance it. She is a teacher and based on the content, structure, sounds and music in her work, I would agree to call her by the profession minister as well. Her delivery befits the pulpit and the classroom desk, as well as the radical speeches that incite crowds to respond with energy and zeal. This can be observable in the poem *In Memoriam: Martin Luther King Jr*, where she lists the horrors of black life as if for shopping purposes. And then somewhere in the middle of the poem she shouts "STOP!" and then carries on writing, the word stop acting as an exclamation from her for us to listen and hear.

June Jordan is also a mother. I am deliberately using the present tense because even as she is gone from this earth, her words remain behind, mothering, teaching, protecting and guiding. Her poetry does more than raising the reader into consciousness. It also lays bare all the unpleasantness of life alongside the good, as a parent does when preparing a child for a life, where the decisions are made by the child rather than the guardian. How does one think and act when their very being is unacknowledged so that they matter not only to themselves but to their children as well? When she lists all that pain and reminds the reader of Martin Luther King Jr she is immortalizing the importance of the meaning of care and sacrifice for the betterment of one's community, as a mother would her children and the children of others.

Audre Lorde poetry is very much the same way June Jordan writes hers. She describes it as a necessary battle in constructing an existence where freedom is dictated, by enforcing it through the words one says and shares with others;

"Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity for our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action".

The poems of Jordan are her life and love offering. They are 'the voice in the wilderness' crying out for a new pair of eyes to see her people. The reader sits on her lap and is coaxed into "a love supreme" throughout her collection, an embrace that softens and hardens the ears, so that the body receives freedom to speak and be heard.

6. In Conclusion

Looking Back at M/other/ing/hood and Assembling

As I compile my poetry series I am doing so with these three men in mind. I am writing about daughters and yet I am inspired by men and their portrayals of mothers because I am mothering a boy and am intrigued by this other relationship that I am building. By healing my own experience of being mothered, I am able to see this boy of mine differently. The order in which I am putting the poetry together is one that tables black mothering/hood with all its love as well as historical wounds that are given to the child. The grandmother who mothered the mother, the mother and the daughter/mother who was mothered by both. What does this daughter look like as a series of poetry? What are her memories? How do these memories and the series of expectations put upon her shape the kind of mother she is with her own children? I imagine this is what Ellington's composition would look like on a page, all these stages of mothering that are sometimes beautiful and sometimes ugly and sad and angry. So I journey through the pages and present my grandmother, mother, aunts and great-aunts and the women that have long gone before them. My mother whom I still do not fully know and whose personality left me loved and resented at the same time, and myself the devoted mother who picks through experiences and tries to construct a new mothering/hood, all this stitched together into one long song. I want the sequence to unpack/undress the complexities and paint the unsayable things that hurt in the midst of the things that are lovely and true.

The order of the poetry not only gives reference to the intergenerational relationships through mothering, it also attempts to chronicle the growing years of a black little girl. I begin with the mothers that have gone before and the living ancestors, ooMakhulu, and then the generation of my mother in relation to myself and many black girls I have grown up along side with. In this way I want the experience of reading it to be a kind of a taking a walk through time and memory.

The reader that was assigned to go through the thesis and give feedback understood what I wanted to do with the collection. His/her response on the thesis as a whole was encouraging:

"Tutani's collection is an interesting lens through which women from different generations have experienced life in the South African historical and political landscape. She uses language and music to share the narratives of the women in the Eastern Cape".

I am also pleased that the images I have used to write the story seemed to be understood by the reader, the use of religious references in telling these memories, and the idea that the collection:

"present[s] images of a black woman in a community with a thread of memories that flows from one generation to another...attempts to bring these images to life by exploring different forms which create a certain kind of music".

I was for a long time afraid that my thought process would not come across the way that I had planned. I also understood the point about shortening some of my lines in

the poetry and sticking to clean cut lines. This adds to the musicality that I am invested in throughout the thesis. In terms of language, I feel that the 'dictionary poems' address my struggles with my own inaccessibility to my own language. I write in English exactly because of the distance between my experience of being mothered and myself. The loss of my tongue comes through in the description of the loss of my mother as a child and the ways in which black girls are pressured into being a certain way. I was not mothered into my language but into the expectations of the cultural and religious norms that come with it. Therefore the isiXhosa titles in some of my poems are an attempt to tell my story through snippets of my language because I was raised with very little of it. What I did have a lot of is the experience of being inside a black, isiXhosa community, and I am able to articulate it in English because I lived its cultural experience well.

I am considering suggestions from the reader, where specific poems like 'Mother Pilgrimage', in which he/she suggested I drop the last three lines, it would sound better with the suggestions implemented. I understand having to leave out some of my lines due to over-explaining and loss of the musical inclination that sits comfortably through the collection. I also liked the reader's suggestion on how to approach Nguwe Iqhawe (Why We Sing):

"the music in the poems comes out clearly in Nguwe Iqhawe (Why We Sing) but is distracted by the abstract images. Throughout the collection, Tutani indents her lines which causes disruption to the music and rhythm of the poems".

I feel a little more confident from the encouraging reader report and have some food for thought in terms of going forward with the thesis towards completion.

My supervisor Stacy Hardy organized a reading together with my colleague Itumeleng Qhali and her supervisor Vangile Gantsho. It was good to be able to read out my collection to people that had not heard or seen it before and get some feedback on possible changes on things that are not clear or language irregularities. There was a strong feeling that my work could benefit with a bilingualism as there are images and scenes that seem to work better in isiXhosa. I agreed with some but also disagreed. What was important for me in this collection was to write memory and describe the joys and the wounds in the way that I usually speak. For instance, I have never called liver 'isibindi' even as I speak isiXhosa at home. We just grew up saying it in English in the middle of a isiXhosa sentence. I wanted to say things the way I grew up saying them, interpret my joys and pains and my peers mothering experiences in the ways and language that I grew up experiencing them in. There is a strong urge in me to engage with my language, hence even writing the poem Mother/Tongue which I wrote in English because this was how it was addressed as at school and my loss of it was caused by this shaming of it in English. My addressing it in English for me speaks back to the language that oppressed it in the first place. This, I felt was not the project to begin interrogating that lack of my mother tongue. I wanted here to lay down my very soul as it is, the way that I speak of it. The rest of the feedback was very constructive also, making me relook at structure and relisten to the sound of my collection. I did some editing that was

necessary and that helped me to spend more time with the work and its possible contribution to the rest of the world of poetry.

I hope to have brought more to the table on mothering, its loneliness at times and its joys and traumas that sometimes go unaddressed and unacknowledged. I hope to invoke more conversation so that our histories and pains and shames may be looked at again with attention and the tenderness of a mother. This is my offering.

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