

Agringada: Like a Gringa, Like a Foreigner.

Tariro Ndoro.

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Tariro Ndoro's debut poetry collection was released in June 2019, mere months before South Africa was engulfed in widespread xenophobic violence once more. In "Black Easter (reflections)" (63) she is in conversation with a (naïve?) South African:

Why don't you visit the townships
my countrymen die there
It will be okay, that doesn't happen anymore

But, of course, it did happen again (and again). And it happens because "you invented words like kwerekwere / & expected the necklacing not to happen" (63), because "words came before your machetes" (63). Belonging, place and displacement, fear and being feared, erasure and endurance—these themes are prevalent, but perhaps this collection is primarily about words, about language. Fear transmitted through words, erasure through silences, displacement through speaking the incorrect language.

The child in the first poems is not only displaced in white spaces—at her boarding school, where she is one of only two Black girls on the class photo (16)—but also at home with her cousins and grandma. At school, she is put in detention for speaking the wrong language (16, 18); she cannot join the white girls in their obsessions with gymkhana and The Vengaboys. At home she is questioned, mocked, for her syntax; she cannot speak to her family about the detentions. The child has "forgotten the sound of home" (16); she "wear[s] silence", for "[l]anguage does not belong to you" (17). In the epigraph Ndoro quotes Tagore: "*I long for thy song but I have no voice*" (emphasis in original). Belonging is predicated upon language and words, but language is difficult to get a grasp on (58, 66), difficult to contain (69), and sometimes insufficient when speaking of human loss and pain (12, 26).

The girl carries her silence into adulthood, not belonging in her own language and no other language truly belonging to her: "like an epiphyte your roots are grounded in no soil, your / homesickness a perpetual flame that knows no quenching / your tongue does not belong to you" (56–7). There is a deep sense of loss here, one that grows as you continue to read through the collection, the loss or complete deletion of one's soul (60). For the one exiled from home and from language, for the one alienated (or viewed as alien) in a new country, belonging seems impossible. There

are moments of refuge in liminal spaces—singing the subtitles to a Bollywood film (60)—and in memories of her mother (51). There are ways to speak without using one's tongue, "with hands, with faces, with song" (69). There is a brief season of joy.

While reading the collection, you become the shadow of this silent girl, later disillusioned woman, following her as she seeks belonging and attempts to reach herself. There is no shortage of people telling her where her place in the world is—we encounter variations of 'go back to where you came from', the voices of white supremacy telling her to not act as if she's from a compound, to be civilised. There is a man who "refuses to be refused" (42), men who silence women with money, with guns, with loyalty (47). And the ultimate marker of our place in the world; the passport, "that offending document" (54) that, for a moment at least, acts as an equaliser as people wait, and wait, and queue, and wait, to cross the border. What becomes clear is that putting someone in 'their place' is an act of displacement, a way to signal that who they are is not a correct way of being.

Yet this displacement brings a unique gift—looking from the outside, the poet describes the places where she has lived but not belonged, the people who shaped her, so evocatively and with a clarity that speaks of a deep attentiveness to the world around her. This attentiveness is in part a result of a life lived watching others carefully (white teachers, men, immigration officials) in order to survive, but the poet also holds a degree in microbiology. One gets a sense of a person open to the world ("*I long to join thy song*"), curious down to the minutiae, despite the ways in which the world denies and erases her. This shines through in the poem "Mbare City Heights" (27–8), where she writes of coming to understand her father and grandfather once she also leaves home for Harare: "You learnt to wash your body with soap in mouth, / Your panty too—otherwise it was stolen"; "You learnt humility—pride made you a target" (27).

Her attentiveness allows her to see what others cannot: "the brutality of binaries" (56). Not only the brutality of a xenophobic and racist state, but also the potential brutality that lies behind the "snubbing [of] those who are not like you in speech and ancestry" (56) of her "homesick brothers" (57). It is not only the place we call home, not only our nationality or tongue that give shape and structure and meaning to our lives. The person denied this limited form of belonging, the exile or the immigrant, the "cultural chimaeras" (16), is not without an identity. We are shaped as much by the

places we belong as by the places we do not—a truth that crystallises towards the end of the collection (66):

I remember that I too am not from around these parts
That this city, this town is not my own
Although I cannot erase it
From my being

Ndoro finds herself, then, in the realisation that the kind of belonging promised by society is not the belonging she seeks. Her disillusionment is also a moment of promising truth (70):

*Curse is
you will never fit in*

*Blessing is
you will never want to*

We need to reimagine what it means to belong—beyond the binaries, the borders, the rigidity that seeks to cement belonging but in reality only displaces us and alienates us from the world. What does it mean to be at home in the world? Ndoro’s poetry guides us towards a possible answer: to sit with our memories and our longings and our loss, to recognise “all the lines that tether you” (69) but also that geographies can’t hold you, to be as attentive to the world in its unjustness (throughout) as we are in childhood (23). To be truly at home in the world and to belong to oneself is to be at odds with the realities of our current world and our current system.

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