

Makhosazana Xaba & Jenny Bożena du Preez

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Interview

**Tongues of their mothers:
the language of writing**

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. You and Karen Martin write about how, in Queer Africa, there are a number of stories about queer men written by women and vice versa and that many stories ignore the national, gender and racial boundaries of their writers (viii).¹ There is often a lot of controversy around the idea of writing outside of the confines of one’s own identification or positionality. What, do you think, are the dangers of doing so, and what does a writer need to do to avoid them?

The main dangers of doing this are failing or choosing not to research characters and contexts well enough to present believable characters and stories. Often these writers use the exhausted stereotypical tropes of who they understand the “other” to be. We are often told to “write about what we know”. So, it is simple: if you want to write about what you don’t know, something outside of your “positionality”, then research it first, live in it, with it, listen to it, ask it questions, ask questions about it, learn to speak its language, understand it well enough before you start writing.

There are many levels at which to talk about the use of language within the context of this question of positionality and identity. I will share a few examples, starting with the one I find most challenging: dialogue. If I wanted to write a short story about #FeesMustFall from the perspective of middle class Black student characters involved, I would have to learn the lingo of young, Black, middleclass, Johannesburg-cosmopolitan, students.² It is a unique language and for the story to resonate with the readers who identify as these characters, the characters I create would have to sound like them or the story would fall flat on its words.

Below is an extract from an email I received from Panashe Chigumadzi on 28 July 2015 after she finished reading *Running and other stories*. I use this quotation to make the point about dialogue because I remember so clearly how challenging this particular story, “People of the valley” was because it is so dialogue heavy. I had given

myself the challenge to write a dialogue-driven story and pushed myself to portray the authenticities of the numerous voices of the characters in this story.

As you know, like a young person from the community, I just wanna say, I, really, uh, you know, like what you had to say, you know. Like how you said it. It was kinda like, awesome. And, kinda, how do you say, uncanny, how you captured the nuances in the voices of the, you know, youth. You know the feeling when, like, someone, like, makes you feel naked with, like, how well they kinda like get into your mind? Ya, well, like, ya, that was me. (Chigumadzi)

Then there is that layer of nuance and detail around language that I also think is important. For instance, if I wrote this sentence in a short story: “She was so angry she didn’t care, she told the whole story right there, during the people,” an editor whose mother-tongue and only language of fluency is English would most likely tell me to change this sentence with a comment on grammar; the grammatically correct version for “during the people” being “in front of everyone”. If, however, you know enough about your characters using the language, “during the people” would not only make the point, it would likely induce a smile on the readers whose positionality you enter and portray as a writer. There is a fascinating dynamic that unfolds when embracing a second language and depending on and because of one’s first language. As a writer, you need to understand this well enough and/or research it extensively if you are to write stories on such characters and render them believable.

I remember soon after the publication of K. Sello Duiker’s book, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, how I loaned the book to many women friends. Almost all of them commented on how well Duiker had portrayed women. Some went as far as implying and/or saying: I was disappointed that Duiker isn’t a woman. This point then is about more than the spoken language as it is presented in dialogue, it is about the *language* of writing and presenting the characters and their personalities within their specific contexts. These readers were commenting on how Duiker’s language—as in communicating—about women felt authentic and believable. Duiker got into women’s minds, to use Chigumadzi’s expression. This is often the area where writerly racial breakdowns often occur. This manifests in its most extreme ways in this South Africa that is still so divided, racially.

Self-identifying and co-created communities tend to develop a language (speech and beyond speech) of their own based on what brought them together in the first place. When writing a story about a community like that, it would have to resonate with and be loyal to the nature and substance as well as quirkiness of that community.

Often, when people think of the erotic, or erotica, they think of stories that have graphic sex scenes. Your short story, “Inside”, was published in Open: An Erotic Anthology by South African Women Writers, even though it does not contain a single sex scene. What is your

understanding of what makes something erotic? And where do you think the line is between pornography, or exploitative depictions of sex, and erotic representation?

My understanding is that pornography is part of an entertainment industry wherein the goal is to make sexual intercourse the showpiece in and of itself and induce arousal for the consumers. Like all industries, there are financial transactions. Pornography is about selling sex. I would like to believe people, the models, enter this industry knowingly and get paid as per agreements.

Exploitative sex often involves, but is not limited to, lack of consent and may occur within a “normal relationship”. Depictions of exploitative sex appear in fiction and often it is in heterosexual encounters where women are the receivers/targets of the exploitation. Sometimes the exploitation occurs where there is consent of both parties but one of the parties has a hidden agenda. It is in the fulfilment of this, not previously shared, agenda then that the exploitation of one consenting party unfolds. Let me add, depictions of exploitative sex are not limited to heterosexual relationships and encounters.

Erotic representation to me speaks to pleasure, enjoyment, consent and a mutual desire to engage sexually with the other person. “Inside” is the very first erotic short story I wrote. When I approached the story I was deliberate about needing to write an erotic story where there is no sex because sex is not necessarily the only thing that makes an encounter erotic. I initially thought I would write a story focussed on foreplay, but then I changed my mind. This story is about “extended foreplay” if you like. It is about desire in its tentativeness and yet-unspeakable state and stage. Put differently, I wanted to explore other and nuanced layers and ways of writing the erotic, within a same-sex couple. A reader once told me of how irritated they were when they first read “Inside” because “nothing happens in this story”. It was upon the third rereading that they got it and suddenly, “so much was happening”. This feedback affirms my intentions.

The problem, as we have seen over the years of discussions and debates is that there are slippery slopes among these three areas. The line moves. For instance, a model in the pornography industry may feel exploited when payment agreements are breeched. Imagine a short story that depicts that slippage idea. Imagine another depicting the slippage from eroticism to exploitation.

The added problem is that these concepts come with subjective interpretations. It would take a skilled writer to work with characters, narration and dialogue in ways that make these subjectivities clear and portray the slippages I speak of in literarily interesting ways.

Running and Other Stories begins and ends with stories that write back to Can Temba’s “The Suit”, and you write in the acknowledgements that you were inspired by Siphiso Mahala’s

rewriting of the short story. Zukiswa Wanner has also written a short story in response to "The Suit". What do you think it is that draws writers back to that story over and over again?

I will only speak for myself. I came across Zukiswa Wanner's story after I had written my two stories, so her story did not influence mine in any way. Broadly speaking and being Biko-esque:

Can Themba wrote what he liked.

I did not like what he wrote.

In response, I wrote what I like.

Siphiwo Mahala wrote what he likes.

I liked the *idea* of what he wrote.

In inspiration, I mimicked the idea

But still, I wrote what I like.

Specifically speaking, I was "drawn" to these stories ("The suit" and "The suit continued") by two different reasons. What drew me to Siphiwo Mahala's story was the act of writing a sequel of sorts, taking on the story of one of the characters. I thought that was an impressive creative endeavour. Until then I had only ever read sequels by the same writer. Upon reading Mahala's story I was reminded of the play, "The suit," I had watched at the Market Theatre in the 1990s long before I was a writer. My story, "The suit continued: The other side," is about taking on one character's side and allowing them the space and voice to speak for themselves of their own motivations. In this story I was also playing around with the point of view; I liked the idea of a first person-cum-omniscient narrator who is an ancestor because they could also make Siphiwo Mahala a character in their telling of their story. I wrote this story first. The seed of "Behind the suit" was sewn at the completion of "The suit continued: The other side."

I was drawn to Can Themba's story by what it failed to give me as a reader. In "The suit," I was disturbed by the amount of misogyny, the one dimensional characters and the poorly motivated actions of the characters. In "Behind the suit", I present Philemon as a multidimensional character who had a secret to keep and therefore his misogyny becomes slightly tolerable. In my story Philemon had a motive beyond the patriarchal man whose word is law, whose ability and confidence to punish are taken for granted and whose power is unquestionable. I want to believe that I humanised Philemon more in "Behind the suit". I like, empathise with and understand the Philemon I created. I would like to believe that readers see him as a likeable human being. He is whole and has faults. Most importantly, he is "surviving" in a patriarchal society that would prefer to ignore, marginalise, oppress and, better still, erase him.

I am almost done writing the story of Gladys, the character I introduced in "The suit continued: The other side." It has been such fun imagining what her life looked

like after her departure from Sophiatown; what choices she made and why?

From a writerly perspective, I wanted to achieve two things. First, I aimed to develop the characters—Philemon and Matilda—as more complex individuals, with credible motivations for their actions. Second, I wanted to write against the spectacular. Come to think of it, having to feed a suit daily is so spectacular it is ridiculous. From a political standpoint, I wanted to write against and push back on patriarchal heteronormativity and its concomitant misogyny. What we have been led to understand was the bohemian nature of Sophiatown made it fertile ground for these sequels.

You've published two collections of poetry and a collection of short stories. In an interview with Pumla Gqola you talk about having an impact in multiple genres because each "demands a specific language and are able to achieve differently" (83). How do you find working in different genres, and what do short stories allow you to achieve that poetry does not, and vice versa? And what possibilities does the short story genre offer the writer in contrast to the more popular form of the novel? Finally, since you talk about wanting to write in multiple genres, do you think you will ever write a novel?

I wrote a novel in 2000. It is still in draft form after undergoing a number of readings, feedback, revisions and going through two publishing houses. I still plan to return to it.

Poetry makes me feel. The short story makes me see and touch within a limited space of time and a few characters. The novel takes me on meandering journeys over time, often through many characters and places.

I enjoy poetry's brevity and its moment-in-time-ness. I neither read nor write long meandering poems which is different from saying they do not have value and place. This is merely my personal preference. If a poem fails to make me feel something, it has not succeeded. Short stories are like a window into a life. The stories I consider successful contain an immediacy that I enjoy connecting to. They package narration, dialogue and scene with characters who give the reader something, sometimes a lot but never all. I enjoy short stories which leave me finishing the story off, taking it with me, imagining numerous possibilities. The novel's beauty is in the journey of ongoing unravelling. With some novels this unravelling may take a whole life of a character and even include lives of characters in generations before and after. The other attraction is the expansiveness and the detail. When tension works well in a novel it can turn one's stomach into knots. And sometimes when I have finished a novel I am disappointed that it is all fiction because I am wishing it were real. Or, I am relieved it is a novel because the reality would be too ghastly to accept. Sometimes it is the elegance in the writing style that makes me anxious about coming close to the end because I do not want to part ways with the exhilarating exquisiteness.

The challenge I take on when writing in any of these genres is that of stretching my creativity through all means possible—including humour, playfulness and breaking of accepted genre-specific rules—in order to achieve what I have said above on each genre. It is an ongoing journey; I am learning all the time, the process unfolds uniquely with each writing piece. I love reading books about writing and I look for and buy them constantly because they are a part of this learning journey. I particularly enjoy books on punctuation because I am delightfully aware of how it is possible to heighten the storytelling through tactfully considered punctuation. However, I am not yet confident about writing like that. My favourite book on punctuation is entitled, *The best punctuation book, period.*³

You've been responsible for editing Queer Africa and now Proudly Malawian: Life Stories from Lesbian and Gender-nonconforming Individuals. What has drawn you to these particular projects? And what is the role of editor like, in contrast to the role of the writer?

I worked on *Queer Africa* because I was approached by Karen Martin to co-edit the book. Similarly, with *Proudly Malawian* I was approached by the Director at GALA because GALA had raised funds for the work. Being an editor for fiction where we used a call for submission process is radically different from editing life stories with people who are not necessarily aspirant writers.

For *Queer Africa*, once the submissions were in we read and chose stories that met the literary criteria and worked with those writers to make their stories even better, where we could. It is a much simpler process. Biased as it is because we had to choose stories *we* liked, it is uncomplicated.

For the life writing project I had to design a writing workshop based on the interview transcripts I had been given on each person. After the workshop I sat with each person's writings on each exercise in order to weave a narrative. *That* is challenging. I made it more challenging because I wanted to make each life story come across as unique as the individuals were, even though they had all undergone the same writing exercises. For each participant I picked writing that was "best" and did not use what had not worked well. As a result, even though everyone had done all the writing exercises we did in three days, the final narrative does not include content from all the exercises and each narrative has its in-built sequence. That was challenging and time consuming.

Being an editor means distance and lack of ownership; it is not your story. Your role is that of a facilitator; you are supportive of someone else's creative work. You give all the skill you have to help make the best of the story being told. While being an editor resonates with the nurturing aspects of my personality I think of it as a feminist act of service. It is a crucial and urgent political act of curation.

Being a writer means proximity to self that is as close as the voices in the head, it means ownership. Ownership means making choices and deciding on every single

step, killing characters, putting them in hospital beds, making them walk for hours in blistering weather conditions, turning them into ancestors. Writing is fun, even though it is also hard and challenging work. Writing is unmitigated freedom to engage in the creative process. Writing is freedom to bring into the world something new. There is a lot of personal power and sheer joy that comes with the ownership of a book that no one else can ever claim as theirs. A book that no one can deny exists, where the best they could do is ignore it. Having not yet lived longer in democratic South Africa than I lived under apartheid, creative writing also feels like a close-to-magical personal *coup d'état*. I do not take it for granted, yet. The act of transforming imagination and persistent voices in my head into a readable piece is liberating. When I write I feel this liberation in every part of my body.

On The Spark you talk about the “challenge of living and actively addressing multi-layered and interconnected issues, be they racism, sexism, class, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity and phobias of all kinds”. You deal with this kind of intersectionality in Running and Other Stories. This issue has also recently emerged in the #FeesMustFall movement. How does one go about unpacking these issues without hierarchizing one issue over another? And what is the power of fiction in representing these kinds of intersections?

When Black people and women everywhere in the world talk about their need to read fiction that has people like them, they are in fact talking about the structural and institutional nature of racism and sexism. It is this structural and institutional nature of racism and sexism that has allowed for the burdensome preponderance of books by men and white people to prosper and thus present-as-normal this world of books and literature, a world that is foreign to and, often anti, Black people and women.

So, the very act of writing Black and women characters begins to address those layers of intersectionality. Privileging the visibility of Black women and voicing them variously is what I regard as my acts of feminism. Therefore, each of the stories in the book, *Running and Other Stories*, speaks to more than two issues (racism and sexism being the ones I most often address) of intersectionality. In addition to racism and sexism, class, sexuality (lots of it), homophobia, and ethnicity are common. I do not address religion, ableism and other isms. In short, I think it is possible to address more than one intersectionality issue in any one story but I doubt it is possible to write about all issues in one story. The power of fiction is in offering to the readers the world as they live it but no single story can do it all at once.

In her introduction to Queer Africa, Pumla Gqola discusses the use of the term “queer” in the title of the collection. She points to the debates going on around the term and notes that some embrace the term while “others are worried about whether it adequately speaks usefully

to contexts outside the geographical politics of its emergence" (2). In my own research, I keep coming up against the difficulty of talking about sexuality and gender in an African context, because most of the vocabulary we have in academia, and most of the theory, comes from a Western context. To what extent do you think these terms and approaches can be used to productively talk about gender and sexuality in Africa?

Tackling xenoglossophobia is the first challenge. In South Africa, indigenous African languages are "foreign" to academia. Academia needs to accept this broad problem and commit to addressing it. If academia and most of theory had been accepting and receptive to positioning and treating as integral to the praxis the nine indigenous and official languages, the difficulty you speak of would have been reduced to a minimum by now, just over two decades after democracy. The "vocabulary" of academia and most of theory excludes the nine indigenous and *official* South African languages. If this were to change I believe we would come to realize the depths and nuance in the studies of gender and sexuality. We would begin to see just how far the landscape stretches and how diverse and/or similar it is. Language is a great entry point towards understanding concepts and the societies/communities that use them. Because gender, sexuality and sexual orientation are already such loaded and contested concepts it becomes important to use less contested entry points, the tongues of their mothers.⁵

I say this because I recall that when I worked in the women's health and sexual and reproductive rights fields when time came to talk about sex and gender with women I often found that the zone of comfort for most women was mother tongues. That was when conversations about sexuality became really exciting and authentic.

The South African example of the Afrikaans language lives with us. Why is academia unprepared to learn from it? How long did it take for Afrikaans to be used in science, literature, academia, law and technology, to name a few? What did the apartheid regime do to achieve that? How much money was put into achieve this? What programmes and projects were set up specifically to achieve the mainstreaming, officialisation and intellectualisation of Afrikaans?

IsiZulu and isiXhosa, respectively, have consistently been the top two most widely spoken languages in South Africa. Why is academia choosing to be blind and deaf to this midday-sun-glaring and thunder-like-sounding problem? There is hope though, I am aware that some universities are starting to take small steps towards addressing this xenoglossophobia.

*You are a gender activist and were a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe during the apartheid years, so political action seems to be very important to you.⁶ You also talk about how, in *Running and Other Stories*, for example, the personal is political for the main character. Do you*

think the personal is always political, and is writing always necessarily political? And, when writing is political, what is its political function? To what extent do you think writing can change material reality, or is its function very different?

Writing has been known to change material reality. The remains of Sarah Baartman returned to South Africa because of the poem, "I have come to take you home", written by Diana Ferrus. A French politician, Nicolas About, happened upon the poem, read it, was moved by it and decided to use it to introduce a bill in his parliament about returning Sarah's remains to South Africa. But it started with the emotional and intellectual changes that the poem induced in him. From there he used his power as a parliamentarian to change the law which made it possible to then change the materiality of Sarah Baartman's situation. Many a politician, including Mandela, had tried before.

Diana wrote the poem when she was in living in the Netherlands, feeling homesick and empathising with Sarah. Diana's poem came from a space of felt reality. The authenticity that comes across in this poem and of course her creativity are responsible for the success of this poem. So it is not just the "political nature" of writing that matters, it is also the authenticity of it, as well as the creativity in it that serve to complete the picture.

I use this example because of its iconic, unprecedented, international nature. It would be easy to think of it as an exception. But, I think for many of us, that is indeed the process: writing speaks to our emotions and intellect and it is that which leads us to actions which later change material reality. That is how I understand the relationship of writing to material reality. Indeed there are everyday examples of material change some of my readers have shared with me.

That said, some obviously political writing fails to achieve the changes it may have desired because it may lack one or the other ingredients I mention above. But we also all respond differently to different writing and that is based on who we are at many levels. A few years ago I decided to take a break from reading novels whose central characters are men. I do not care how well written they are, how widely recommended they are or how many awards they have won. Why? Simply because reading is a choice of pleasure for me and I want to do it on my terms. Gone are the days when the majority of books available in bookstores were written by white people and mostly males. I started reading in a time where even books written by Black South Africans were few and far between. In a sense I am also reading to reverse the situation I experienced as a teenager and young adult. I want to read about people of the world who are like me, people I can relate to.

I call myself a feminist activist. The use of gender in doing the work of feminism is a tactic. We live in a world we did not create, one that imposes its political ways upon us. So yes, the personal is always political because we also live in a world that

we are recreating in many and varied ways. We live in a country whose period we call “post-apartheid” but the majority of what is “post” about apartheid are its laws and policies, which is different from saying nothing has changed. What I am referring to are the values and mind-sets of many South Africans who are racist, sexist, classist and homophobic to name a few, as if we do not have the best constitution in the world. Reality is lagging behind our new laws and policies.

My lived reality impacts my writing and therefore my writing is political. But, what I most admire about creative writing are the intoxicating subtleties that end up achieving more than direct politics. It is possible to use writing to change people’s minds without them reading a political speech or going to a political rally. This does not mean that writing for sheer entertainment and leisure is not valid.

Notes

1. *Queer Africa* is an anthology of short stories about queer characters in Africa edited by Karen Martin and Makhosazana Xaba.
2. The Fees Must Fall movement rose to prominence in 2015, demanding free tertiary education as well as decolonization of university curricula, among other issues.
3. June Casagrande. *The best punctuation book, period. A Comprehensive Guide for Every Writer, Editor, Student, and Businessperson*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014.
4. *Tongues of their Mothers* is the title of Xaba’s first published collection of poetry.
5. Umkhonto weSizwe was the armed wing of the ANC.

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