

Yim'uthi gomololo

Land, labour, poetry and the struggle for
environmental justice in South Africa

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Abstract

The present work is an interdisciplinary investigation of the environmental politics of written and oral literature in South African society and the shifting role of the amaXhosa imbongi, or oral praise poet, from colonial times to the present. I argue that since colonial times, African literature has played a vital role in constituting understandings of and responses to the social and environmental impacts of capitalism, exploitation, and uneven development. I begin by situating the relationships between amaXhosa people, their environments, and the Western political economy historically, drawing on existing scholarship in the fields of human geography, political ecology, and postcolonial ecocriticism. I then examine several examples of isiXhosa poetry in translation against the backdrop of their historical, political, and environmental contexts, investigating how these poems grapple with the arrival and expansion of extractive capitalism in South Africa and the entrenchment of oppressive patriarchal, colonial, and profoundly racist politics that the process entailed. My research includes several months of field work in the Eastern Cape, where I conducted semi-structured interviews with iimbongi and their audiences. Based on these interviews, I show how the ongoing practice of ontologically and spiritually rich literature has a profound effect on audiences, contributing directly to the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of people and their communities. In recent times, despite radical changes in South African society, poetry has continued to provide a forum for political transformation, social relationships, and environmental justice. In rural and peri-urban areas alike, iimbongi remain a relevant and respected source of knowledge and cultural identity that can help heal the lasting psychic trauma wrought by colonialism, apartheid, and contemporary crime and unrest.

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Note on the title

The phrase “Yim’uthi gomololo” urges that one should not be shaken by any possible opposition and instead must be brave at all costs, even to the extent of giving up one’s life.

The various translations could include “stand firm,” “be strong,” or “be courageous.”

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Introduction

They talk to me about progress, about ‘achievements’, diseases cured, improved standards of living.

I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.

They throw facts at my head, statistics, mileages of roads, canals, and railroad tracks. [...]

I am talking about millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life—from life, from the dance, from wisdom.

~ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

Postcolonial ecocriticism is a field of environmental humanities that addresses “the need to bring postcolonial and ecological issues together as a means of challenging continuing imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010). In doing so, it addresses shortcomings in both postcolonial studies and ecocriticism. Specifically, it engages with modes of colonial domination that extend beyond the human realm to the more-than-human environment while tackling the difficult notions of “nature” and “environment” that, in the West¹, have troubling associations with patriarchy, private

¹ This dissertation uses the terms “West” and “Western” to refer to the industrialized society and its attendant culture and worldviews that originated in western Europe and, via colonialism and the imposition of capitalism, spread from there around the world. I distinguish between “Western” lifeways deriving from Europe (and later the U.S.), and “traditional” lifeways indigenous to precolonial South African peoples.

property ownership, and colonialism itself. Over the past several decades, from relatively narrow definitions and emphases on pristine nature, ecocritical conceptions of the environment and human/environment relationships have expanded to include situations of alienation, dislocation, deracination, and oppression in all its forms. As these emphases have shifted, ecocriticism has increasingly incorporated a widening array of environmental justice concerns.

The present dissertation examines the colonial and imperial underpinnings of contemporary environmental practice by looking specifically at the case of South Africa. I examine the country's colonial and segregationist histories with the view that these processes represented "imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance" that shape contemporary understandings of the other-than-human environment, as well as relationships between peoples. I am interested in the social justice questions that are the central concern of postcolonial studies (e.g., exploitation, displacement, dispossession, and inequality), the environmental concerns (particularly related to place, landscape, and human relationships with them) taken up by ecocriticism and the tensions between the two fields (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011). My dissertation engages with these interests, arguing that many notable isiXhosa poetic texts produced throughout the colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid periods effectively resist both White cultural domination and a long history of environmental and social looting by colonial and capitalist powers. Through conversations with practicing poets and their audiences, I show that poetry not only plays an important artistic role in contemporary South African communities, but also helps form and maintain cultural identities, offering wisdom that could help guide and transform communities struggling through the difficult aftermath of South Africa's history of social and environmental violence.

The literature that most strongly voices the linkages between social justice and environmental praxis is not readily available or accessible to Western literary critics. Oral and vernacular African² literature—in Africa a much vaster literary archive than printed, colonial language works—often exists only in ephemeral forms, which, with the added complication of cultural and language barriers, creates real limitations in terms of the ability of Western scholars to engage with these texts. Such factors contribute to the marginalization to the point of exclusion of most African literatures and their attendant environmental views from ecocritical scholarship, despite advances in incorporating global literatures and intercultural understandings of environment into postcolonial ecocritical analysis.

My dissertation therefore makes an important and novel contribution to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism by seeking out and discussing both written and oral texts and literatures originally published or performed in the vernacular. In doing so, it widens the scope of South African postcolonial ecocriticism beyond poetry and fiction published in English, which has been the central focus of South African ecocriticism to date. It also expands the scope of literary genres considered by ecocriticism, respecting the fact that not all “texts” are written and that orality is a central aspect of African literary culture that informs and infuses contemporary forms. Poetic forms in particular have “the capacity to shake up the divisive mindset that is endemic in our class-inflected and still-colonized world

² In South Africa the term “African” is commonly used as a collective term for South African peoples who trace their ancestry to the African continent (e.g., amaXhosa, amaZulu, etc.). In apartheid South Africa, the term “Black” also included Coloured and Indian peoples. While this dissertation is focused on African peoples and cultures in South Africa, I have generally followed North American convention in using the term Black to refer collectively to people of African origin only, as distinct from White people of European origin. In places, I have also used the term “African” to refer more generally to people and cultures originating on the African continent. The African continent is a vast and incredibly diverse cultural, ecological and political mosaic comprising 54 countries and 1.2 billion people who collectively speak hundreds of languages. By no means do I consider “African” a static or monolithic category. At the same time, the precolonial movements of people throughout the continent have contributed to cultural and linguistic similarities that transcend contemporary political boundaries, while shared experiences of exploitation and colonization by European nations have resulted in historical similarities between nations. As a result, there is some validity to the term, despite its being problematic if used uncritically.

[...] by holding different realities side by side: by juxtaposing the received mainstream perception of colonial reality with a perception that is rooted in Aboriginal experience” (Cariou 2014, 33).

The omissions of oral and vernacular literatures are particularly important to attend to given the broader race-based exclusions and inequalities that are a central aspect of the contemporary political economy. One of the most striking aspects of global capitalism is the extent to which it has unfolded unevenly along racial lines (e.g., Rodney 1981, Biel 2000). South Africa is a particularly prominent example of racialized uneven development that has produced vast, racially ordered divisions of material and social wellbeing. At the same time, South Africa is also a vibrant example of a terrain of struggle, in which an oppressed and exploited class consistently has used its resourcefulness, wit, imagination, and courage to advance its liberation agenda. As centuries of extractive capitalism have fundamentally reordered South African landscapes and human relationships with them, the same period has seen *imbongi* consistently voice alternative ways of thinking and seeing. Thus, the South African case, which provides a poignant example of the ongoing social, economic, and environmental costs of racial injustice and of the power of liberation movements to effect real ideological change, also illustrates the urgent need for African-centric research into ways in which geographies of power and inequality are actively constructed, contested, and reshaped through discursive and creative means and the ways in which oral and vernacular language texts in particular offer insights into the priorities and worldviews of subaltern classes that often speak but are rarely heard (Scott 1998, Harvey 2006, Smith 2008).

This dissertation is unique in that it pays particular attention to the role of poetry in effecting social and political change. One of the most vital and important aspects of poetry, particularly performed poetry, is its ability to elicit and encourage an emotional response.

Unlike much written prose, poetry's affective power relies not only on the meaning of its content but also on the emotional force of its rhythm and form. Poetic devices—rhythm and metre, metaphor and allegory, parallelism, alliteration, and richly detailed vocabulary—are not merely a matter of aesthetics; in performance poetry especially, these features of poetry are physical undertakings that produce physical and emotional effects on their audiences. Increasingly, scholars are finding that emotional engagement with issues of oppression and injustice are fundamental to social movements and collective action (Barford 2017, Jasper 2011, Hercus 1999). Barford (2017) notes, “Emotions are central to how people are positioned in relation to a topic or situation. Being emotionally engaged may amplify attitudes and provide an impetus for action. In contrast, denial of something being morally problematic may mean not feeling disturbed” (25). It is therefore surely not a stretch to note that as an art form that is uniquely able to use language to get at the heart of things, encouraging reflection, emotional engagement, and flights of the imagination, poetry has enormous potential to open emotional spaces, arousing the sensations that can motivate social change. This study considers the importance of language, form, and the evident skill of iimbongi in unleashing this poetic potential.

As a literary genre strongly associated with the oral arts, poetry, not by coincidence, has become increasingly marginal and invisible in a culture preoccupied with the written word. Rather than being the public and openly political art form enjoyed by a collective as it has been in the past, poetry in contemporary Western society is all too frequently seen as an obtuse and difficult art form with meanings accessible only to an elite class of writers and intellectuals. Yet poetry has retained its political and philosophical function in other societies,

notably in South Africa where the imbongi, the traditional³ oral poet, remains a respected political institution. In examining the contemporary politics of Black South African poetry, I argue that there is a place for poetics in public life in contemporary Western society just as there was in the past.

In a recent essay collection on poetry and poetics, poet and essayist Jane Hirschfield notes, “One way we praise a work of art is to say it has ‘vision,’ and good poetry and good seeing go together almost always” (Hirshfield 2015). In the traditional poetry of the amaXhosa people of South Africa, vision is particularly significant. “Imbongi,” or the plural “iimbongi,” is the term for the amaXhosa oral poet, sometimes translated as a “praise poet,” who performs in an improvised eulogistic genre known as “izibongo,” with the singular “isibongo” used to refer to a specific poem. Iimbongi are prophetic individuals, visionaries in a spiritual as well as an intellectual or artistic sense. As performance artists, they are visible interlocutors with culture and power and are, at the same time, agents of sound, enacting words as events that revive the power of orality and the weight and magic that traditionally inheres in the spoken word (Ong 2002, Furniss and Gunner 1995, Abram 1997). Their art recalls the way in which words, when spoken, unfold aurally across time rather than visibly in space, as dynamic and ephemeral occurrences (Ong 2002). With the brief, living imperative of spoken words and the message they carry, the imbongi and their art disrupt notions of space and time, progress and development, possession and distribution that have developed alongside the rise of the printed word and global capitalism. In doing so, they make present and visible more ancient ways of relating to time, language, and landscape and to the implacable natural forces that ultimately organize human lives.

³ This dissertation uses the term “traditional” to refer to aspects of amaXhosa society and culture that predate colonialism. While the term has often been used problematically or uncritically, I have not found a satisfactory substitute for this dissertation. There is an inherent dynamism to all societies, cultures, and languages and my use of “traditional” is in no way meant to imply that the concept in question is static or monolithic.

Yet even as their orality links them to non-literate ontologies, iimbongi have a dynamic rapport with the printed word. The British missionaries who arrived in what is now South Africa's Eastern Cape province in the early nineteenth century soon developed an orthography for the isiXhosa language that enabled the printing and distribution of religious texts and the dissemination of Christian and occidental ideologies (Opland 1998). By the mid-nineteenth century, several isiXhosa newspapers and publishing houses had been established, and although these remained largely mediated by colonial forces, they also enabled the circulation of particularly African interpretations and disputations of history, politics, and contemporary society (Mgqwetho 2007, Jordan 1973). In embracing print, and more recently digital, media as a way of circulating their words, iimbongi sustain a protean relationship with both written and oral, vision and sound, traditional and modern, rural and urban, blurring these categories into a fluid and multifaceted continuum.

In these and other respects, the iimbongi's literature is fundamentally environmental, even though it may not obviously engage with natural themes in ways familiar to Western readers of English language literature. Through conceptual and material linkages, it extends the potentialities of individual life in post-colonial, late capitalist South African society beyond everyday concerns, calling forth ancestral presences and the responsibilities associated with homeland and lineage even as the language calls forth new possibilities for human identities, ways of relating to land and environment and possible social and political futures. In addition to these esoteric environmentalisms, scholars have written extensively on the political role of iimbongi, particularly with respect to their denunciation of colonialism and apartheid capitalism and the devastating effects that these systems have had on South African peoples and landscapes (e.g.,Mgqwetho 2007, Opland 1987, Neser 2011). In this aspect as well vision is important, for "although there is a long history of environmental

degradation in Africa by imperial capital operating with impunity, this degradation has mostly been rendered invisible to the world as a result of the continent's extreme marginality both in imperial representation and in the world economic system" (Caminero-Santangelo 2014). Literary artists can expose forms of violence whose temporal or spatial scale obscures their effects for the average observer, and their role becomes even more important in the case of the marginalized and occluded African continent. As Rob Nixon explains, "imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration" (Nixon 2011, 15).

Thus, iimbongi, in representing African histories and experiences in textual form, whether written or oral, enable audiences to perceive hidden sociopolitical realities, encouraging us to sharpen our vision and see more clearly the historical roots and underlying causes of suffering, injustice, and environmental degradation. An imbongi's poetry demands that we change what it is that we see, acknowledging that texts deriving from the West have obscured our vision due to the fact that

Western environmentalism has often occluded environmental damage in Africa and/or its complex historical causes. Because of the association of the continent with wilderness replete with exotic biodiversity and charismatic megafauna, parks or potential parks where one finds the real Africa are often highlighted in the Western environmental imagination while the rest of the continent is ignored. This erasure has often caused mainstream conservationists to overlook environmentally destructive extractive industries in Africa (driven by

foreign economic interests) and facilitated the creation of conservation enclaves for tourists from which local communities are evicted and excluded. (Caminero-Santangelo 2014)

Caminero-Santangelo goes on to describe how such exclusion serves a Western narrative that portrays Africans as “lacking the proper environmental sensibility and knowledge to take care of precious biodiversity hot spots,” while positioning Westerners in the superior position of knowledgeable and judicious stewards and protectors of the land. In contrast, “African environmental writing tends to prioritize social justice; lived environments; and/or the relationships among environmental practice, representations of nature, power, and privilege” (Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 6). African literature also tends to see nature as tightly linked to social and political struggle and to “issues of oppression and liberation” (Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 6). This sets it apart from much Western environmental writing that instead emphasizes escape from socioeconomic interests and a return to the pure states of nature.

In carrying out this research, I have looked to scholarship that has established the role of isiXhosa literature as a medium of social and political critique and the imbongi as a vocal, political figure (e.g., Kaschula 2001, Kaschula 2002, Opland 2005). Following such scholars, I explore the role of imbongi in articulating experiences of exploitation and responses to “an economic order premised on acute inequities” (Nixon 2011, 42). I also draw on Byron Caminero-Santangelo’s (2014) work on the complexities and particularities of African environmentalism to examine the amaXhosa imbongi as a key cultural, political, and environmental figure within resistance movements. Using these frameworks, I look at isiXhosa literature from a specifically ecocritical perspective, exploring the role of this literature in representing and contesting environments defined by colonial and capitalist

power relationships in situations of profound inequality and oppression. I posit that the adaptation of traditional poetic forms provided an authentic voice for silenced and marginalized Black South Africans and helped build a strong, cohesive force of mass resistance to the slow violence of race-based extraction in apartheid South Africa. Their poetry is an important component of South Africa's canon of environmental literature.

In making this argument, I embrace the term "literature" to refer to both oral and written texts throughout this dissertation. I see this choice of terminology as an important means of disrupting the colonial boundaries sometimes imposed to restrict "literature" to printed forms. I also aim to disrupt essentialized notions of "oral" and "literate" cultures that are often not only based on erroneous information, but also support potentially retrogressive ideologies.⁴ In South Africa, as in other regions of the world, oral and written cultures form a dynamic continuum that comprises not only written and performative arts that have existed alongside each other for centuries, but also the vast languages of landscapes and animals that can be read, heard and interpreted with creativity and skill. Rather than seeking to limit the idea of literature to a specific field of expertise practiced by people with particular technologies of symbolic representation, I take up the idea that literature is a vast realm of meaning and understanding that offers a vital means of connection between people and the environments they inhabit (e.g., Bringham 2011, 2008).

The value of the present study lies in my attention to several gaps in environmental humanities scholarship. First, African literary practitioners working in vernacular languages

⁴ For example, David Abram (1997) refers to "the mnemonic trance demanded by orality" in a discussion of oral culture that centres on memorized oral forms and the mnemonic formulae that were an important aspect of European bardic literature (Lord 1960). However, as Jeff Opland takes great pains to demonstrate, *izibongo* is a spontaneous, improvised genre; memorization is not an important aspect of amaXhosa oral literature (e.g., Opland 1983, 1998, 2005). This subverts the argument that oral literature is essentially memorial or formulaic and, by implication, the notion that oral literary artists are restricted in their creative ability or individual talent.

and oral poets in particular remain underappreciated by ecocritics, who by and large are not native speakers of these languages and have not yet tackled the hurdles of language and culture, the ephemerality of oral forms, and the sheer physical inaccessibility of most African texts. In South Africa, much literary imagining has taken place at the margins, in vernacular languages, and in rural and peripheral areas, which has resulted in important works of literature being overlooked by literary and cultural critics. The call to attention that Caminero-Santangelo (2014) issues—that is, to draw the linkages between the work of African literary practitioners and postcolonial notions of environmentalism and environmental justice—has yet to be broadly taken up. Yet another obstacle to overcome is the persistent view of vernacular and oral literatures as folk art, objects of study for anthropologists and African language specialists rather than works of literature with true and lasting literary value. Thus, an additional value of my work is its insistence that African writers, oral poets, and storytellers be taken seriously as literary artists.

Second, through literary criticism of African texts, I address “one of the central tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism as an emergent field,” which is to contest Western notions of development, expose and challenge the neocolonial discourse and practice of development, and articulate alternatives (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 27). The mastery of colonial languages often requires a person’s removal from Indigenous contexts—including rural and traditional lifeways—and a middle or upper class economic background (Ngugi 1986). Literary practitioners working in African languages and in rural areas, on the other hand, remain closer to the “subaltern” that development aims to uplift. Attention to their literature is particularly important for advancing this central task of postcolonial ecocriticism, both in terms of recognizing the agency of subaltern voices in advancing their own forms of development, as well as in providing forms of knowledge and critique that could help guide

and decolonize development as it is currently practiced. The present work helps unshackle development from its ideological reliance on Western political priorities and reposition beneficiaries as cultural and political drivers of development discourse and practice. Through this aspect of my research, I aim to further demonstrate the strong interdisciplinary linkages between arts and culture, politics and economy. I examine the potential of this richly imaginative practice to contribute to more progressive, decolonized versions of development by acknowledging and championing African agency in visualizing and constructing a desired future from the grassroots. In particular, I aim to show the ways in which traditional arts and culture can continue to create alternative political, environmental, and economic visions, showing new possibilities for compassionate and egalitarian relationships between humans and the world around them.

In addition, the present work also extends the existing scholarship on the shifting social and literary role of the amaXhosa imbongi. In much the same way that isiXhosa literature constituted an important form of cultural and ideological resistance to colonialism and apartheid and continues to contest neoliberal capitalism and neocolonial models of development, African literatures more broadly constitute a similar ideological resistance to the hegemony of Western political economy. Despite a rigorously policed and culturally maintained global economic order based on racial segregation, such resistance could help create a more just and democratic global order. The field component of my research, which includes interviews with practicing imbongi and members of their audiences, therefore helps address a critical knowledge gap by examining the social and political role of contemporary literature and associated institutions in rural African societies.

Finally, the geographical and temporal spaces of capitalism hide its human and environmental consequences (Soja 2011, 61). My research extends the work of earlier

scholars who discuss the ways in which the imposition of capitalism and extractive industries onto traditional landscapes and societies constitutes both an environmental and social violence (e.g., Nixon 2011, Caminero-Santangelo 2014). In examining the “political, imaginative, and strategic role of environmental writer-activists,” particularly African poets not traditionally associated with environmentalist writing, I consider the role and importance of their work in helping us “apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the physiological life of the human observer” (Nixon 2011, 15).

In addressing these topics, my dissertation specifically examines the cultural politics of written and oral literature in Black South African society and the ways in which isiXhosa (and, in specific cases, isiZulu) literature in particular has constituted a force of anti-colonial, anti-apartheid, and anti-capitalist resistance that has helped recast power relations within an oppressive and unjust political economy. I investigate approaches, subjects and trends in oral and written isiXhosa literature in translation from the late nineteenth century to the present within the political, social, and economic context of a rapidly changing South Africa. I argue that even authors whose work does not deal primarily with natural settings and landscapes in a way familiar to Western readers nevertheless possess a keen sense of environmental realities and a particularly cogent awareness of the political structures that have so degraded the environments of their homelands.

I undertake this work through an investigation of the history, development, and impacts of South African capitalism, mapping the geographical, ideological, and political tactics by which apartheid capitalism was imposed onto the South African landscape and its inhabitants and the ways in which the policies of separate development, dispossession, and

capital accumulation quickly produced drastically uneven environmental, social, and economic conditions. Alongside this material analysis, I examine a series of poetic works that explicitly or tangentially address geographies of extractive capitalism and actively influence their social and environmental effects.

In developing my argument, I draw on several theoretical frameworks. In my literary analysis, I use the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, a branch of environmental humanities concerned with the nature of our international human community and its relationships with the other-than-human world. I am concerned with both the social justice questions that are the central concern of postcolonial studies (e.g., exploitation, displacement, dispossession, and inequality) and environmental concerns (particularly related to place, landscape, and human relationships with the other-than-human environment) taken up by ecocritical literary studies. Drawing on African postcolonial scholarship (e.g., Mamdani 1996, Mbembe 2001, Mudimbe 1988), I emphasize the authority of African voice and the agency and autonomy expressed through literary practice. This methodological grounding in the field of postcolonial studies also recognizes the well-documented importance of literature and the arts in constructing or contesting political hegemonies and ideologies, encouraging critical thought, and voicing affirmation or resistance to governance and economic structures (Attridge 2015, Biel 2000, Biko 2004, Caminero-Santangelo 2014, Harlow 1987, Nixon 2011, Pratt 2008). Thus, I am also concerned with the political role of writer-activists and their ability

to discern what is occluded, silenced, marginalized by prevailing ways of thinking and feeling, where it's possible to find tensions and fault lines in what is treated as merely given, and at what cost the apparent coherence and stability of the cultural fabric, and the social, economic

and political system out of which it arises, are maintained. (Attridge 2015, 265)

Building on this premise, I examine how the poetic engagement with poverty, labour, oppression, and other aspects of late capitalism can help make intelligible the tensions, contradictions, and injustices of the global economic system.

The first chapter, “Race, space, capital: the making of racist globalization,” presents a brief historical account of the development of the neoliberal capitalism that structures contemporary global systems and relations. Rather than engaging with the extensive debates that exist between different academic factions, this chapter sketches out a general history that is central to the arguments of the dissertation, presenting political and economic factors that gave rise to the colonization and exploitation of Black South Africans and their landscapes. I also emphasize economic and geographical trends that extend beyond the South African border, giving the present work a universal relevance. I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of the role of literature in resistance and ideological transformation.

Chapter Two, “The political ecology of isiXhosa literature,” introduces the cultural and ecological context in which the work takes place. Drawing on the work of isiXhosa literary scholars Jeff Opland and Russell Kaschula, I provide a brief history of the isiXhosa-speaking peoples and their literatures from pre-colonial times to the end of the nineteenth century. I discuss the imbongi and the izibongo genre, including their relationship to other cultural traditions within South Africa and beyond. I also include a brief introduction to the environmental context in which the work is set. I then present the postcolonial, ecocritical, and ecopoetic literary theories that provide a framework for the literary analysis of the following chapters. Finally, I discuss the aim, scope, and methods of my field work.

In Chapters Three and Four, following Rob Nixon (2011), I build on previous

scholarly claims of the political importance of isiXhosa poetry, examining several texts in the context of the social and political events of their respective decades, placing the poet-activists in the centre of the inquiry and considering them as primary interlocutors in the analysis. Specifically, Chapter Three, “Verse, violence, and the migrant labour system,” examines the poetry of Nontsizi Mqgqetho, one of the most prolific isiXhosa poets in print and the only female poet to have produced a substantial volume of published work in isiXhosa. I consider Mqgqetho’s poetry within a political and environmental context that involved the imposition of extractive capitalism on the peoples and landscapes of South Africa from the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in 1886 through the first three decades of the twentieth century. I introduce the political tactics underpinning segregation and apartheid and briefly discuss the political upheaval of the 1920s, the decade in which Mqgqetho’s work was published. Through an analysis of Mqgqetho’s work, I comment on its contribution to isiXhosa literary culture and to a broader ideological critique of the colonialism and capitalism unfolding in South Africa.

Similarly, Chapter Four, “*Black mamba* and the Durban/rural nexus,” considers important, though often overlooked, participants in the liberation movement: Alfred Qabula and Nise Malange. From a discussion of South African political history from 1948 through the 1980s, I move on to an analysis of their poetry within this context, discussing its cultural contribution to the resistance movement. I argue that these fundamentally political texts also function as ecological literature. They draw together urban and rural sensibilities and protest the rupture of environmental relationships that existed between African people and their landscapes prior to the arrival of Western capitalism. In doing so, they articulate an astute awareness and condemnation of the structural factors responsible for widespread environmental degradation and exploitation.

In Chapters Five through Seven, I consider the changing role of iimbongi in the post-apartheid context and various ways in which the genre interacts with contemporary politics, environment, and development ideology. Chapter Five, “Versions of silence,” takes up the prickly issue of censorship in South African politics, from apartheid to the present. Despite a well-documented tradition and contemporary practice in which iimbongi perform the role of political and social critic, many iimbongi feel limited in their current ability to speak truth to power. Drawing on both existing scholarship, my own conversations with practicing iimbongi and textual analysis, I examine some of the interstitial spaces of izibongo, asking what is not said and why. In examining underlying causes of censorship (including the historical desire for a unified resistance movement and the continued repression of dissent in contemporary politics) as well as the commercialisation of the izibongo genre, I argue that the iimbongi is not currently able to perform the role of social mediator and political commentator to the full extent that they may have in a traditional context.

Chapter Six, “Ritual poetry and ideologies of development,” looks more closely at the living tradition of the iimbongi and the ways in which their poetry affects audiences in contemporary South Africa. Here I draw on interviews conducted with people living in and around the rural town of Willowvale in the former Transkei, residents of Joza township adjacent to Grahamstown, and fourteen iimbongi from various communities in the Eastern Cape in arguing that the principal role of the iimbongi in contemporary South Africa may be less political commentator than spiritual, cultural, and social healer. In particular, I discuss their spiritual connection to amagqirha, traditional healers, and the perception common to both iimbongi and their audiences that izibongo perform important healing work through the affective qualities of their content, language, and form.

Finally, Chapter Seven, “Neoliberal land reform and the vocal dispossessed,” draws

together political concerns related to full-blown neoliberal capitalism in post-apartheid South Africa, the failing land reform process, and the shifting significance of traditional leadership and rural identity in contemporary South Africa. Through analyses of historical and contemporary izibongo in translation, I discuss the ways in which their authors engage with issues related to land and dispossession, offering alternative ideas of landscape and belonging that disrupt the market-based logic that directs contemporary land reform. While there is no concrete evidence to indicate that iimbongi have affected the land reform process, I suggest that they offer a valuable ideological counterpoint to the neoliberal discourse that is hegemonic in mainstream society.

The concerns explored in all of these chapters take on an added significance when seen as part of larger-scale patterns of privilege and exclusion. South Africa's drastically skewed distribution of wealth and access—which, despite the rapid growth of a Black middle class remains defined by race—resembles the global economic order in which a collection of elite White nations have defined the institutions, histories and mythologies by which the contemporary world operates. Rooted in problematic political ecologies, ideas of development that offer the potential to bring substantial positive change to the lives of people suffering the lasting effects of poverty, colonialism, and environmental degradation risk reproducing the very teleologies and Western-centric worldviews that have caused so much harm in the first place. By examining critiques originating outside Western structures, “foregrounding the intersection of African literature and the struggle for environmental justice can help keep literary studies off the sidelines of important discussions about how to address social conflict, environmental change, and resource extraction in Africa” (Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 8).

Throughout this work, I engage with the sometimes biased and often incomplete critical attention that African literature has received that reveals much about the separation of Western and African worlds and the limited understanding of African cultures held by the average Western scholar. The present work suffers from similar constraints. I am a White, Canadian, Western-trained, female scholar from a settler colonial background conducting research on a culturally-specific Indigenous poetic form that is largely oral and predominantly male and to which I have had almost no previous exposure. South Africa has a very particular and complex history that I have had no direct experience of, and the oral nature of amaXhosa poetry and culture is entirely different from the forms I have training in.

Furthermore, my knowledge of amaXhosa culture and literature is restricted not only by my obvious outsider status and limited exposure to it, but also by my rudimentary ability in the language. This latter constraint in particular placed decisive boundaries around my analysis as I was limited to materials available in English or materials that I had the budget to have transcribed and/or translated. This language restriction represents a departure from my early plans for the research: I had hoped to spend enough time immersed in the isiXhosa-speaking Transkei to be able to at least understand the language. While I regret that I am not able to enjoy the work of these poets in the original language, my reasons for leaving the Transkei were clear: living in a remote village as a lone white woman without reliable transport was isolating and stressful. Given the violent incidents that took place in the region before and during my stay there, I was often fearful and constantly on the alert. Sadly, once I left the area, I returned to a landscape that is sharply divided along racial, cultural and linguistic lines with few obvious means of bridging the separation.

My personal positionality is clearly highly divergent from my research subject: the oral poetry produced by an Indigenous African people living in situations of extreme

economic precarity within a society shaped by historical and contemporary experiences of violence and racial oppression. This divergence no doubt substantially affects my understanding and interpretation of this literature and the culture it is part of. Yet despite my inability to part ways with the nominal categories that have shaped and defined my own identity and positionality, these categories themselves are neither static nor fixed. In my own case, the research process has dramatically altered my knowledge and understanding of racial dynamics, histories and contemporary experiences of racial and gender oppression and violence. This research has also had a significant impact on my understanding of my place within the complex, racialized matrix of my own decolonizing settler colonial nation, and indeed within a racialized world in which Northern nations such as my own benefit from the ongoing exploitation of others. Thanks to this research process, I have a deepened understanding of my complicity with the privileges that racial disparity has afforded me, and of ways in which I actively resist forms of privilege and oppression. This deepened awareness was one of my main interests in undertaking this research project in the first place, and has been a crucial step in my development as a politically and culturally astute writer in an era of decolonization and reconciliation.

Overall, my experience as a White woman undertaking research in South African towns, townships and rural areas made me aware of research barriers faced by White South African scholars who often feel guilty about their lack of knowledge of the cultures and languages of their compatriots. The divisions and power imbalances that exist within the country are held in place to no small extent by fear. This includes the fear of reprimand for daring to speak about a culture, history or set of beliefs that isn't one's own. In my own case, while the language barrier clearly hasn't stopped me from commenting on many aspects of amaXhosa literature, it has drastically restricted my ability to comment on style and nuanced

uses of the language and has prevented me from situating written or performed works within a broader literary context; any comparative comments are limited to my readings of works available in translation. As a result of such limitations, my analysis may suffer from inaccuracies of which I am unaware.

In spite of these fairly severe limitations, this study nevertheless makes an important contribution to the field by considering the work of important South African artists that have remained largely ignored by literary scholars. In an effort to bridge some of the gaps in previous scholarship, I undertook a rigorous study of isiXhosa grammar and lived for several months in situations of linguistic and cultural immersion that, as mentioned above, also helped me understand more fully the nature and restrictions of my own positionality. Thus, although I am unable to understand and speak the language with any degree of fluency, I feel that my grasp of its aural rhythms and grammatical structures enables me to provide a useful and sensitive critical commentary on translated texts. My work also draws on my strengths as a multilingual poet with training in poetic structures, forms and devices as well as considerable practice reading poetry in other languages. This background has enabled me to comment on the interrelationship between content and form much more extensively than is common in ecocritical analyses, and to note some of the issues related to transcription and translation.

As A.C. Jordan points out, there is a very real danger that Western scholars overlook the cultural complexities that underpin African literatures:

If literature reflects the society which produced it, then understanding the social forces at work in that society is vital to appreciating that society's literature. Unfortunately most of those who write about the literature of Africa are locked in ivory towers [...] This colonialist and

racist mentality—that it is easy for whites to understand “primitive” cultures, but impossible for a non-white to understand “advanced” cultures—is to a large extent responsible for the shoddy, exploitative work on Africa today. (Jordan 1973, viii)

While I cannot satisfy Jordan’s call for “work by African scholars,” I hope that I have approached the work of African artists with the requisite degree of humility, an understanding of the need to understand the artful nuances of its cultural and linguistic context, and an awareness that I, like others, have barely begun to reach such an understanding.

Chapter 1: Race, space, capital: the making of racist globalization

Actually, we have no race classification in the strict sense of the word.

We have population grouping. We in South Africa are not at all obsessed with race.

~ N.F. Treurnicht, National Party MP, in Parliament, 1967

Introduction

From 1488 onwards, South African history is a story of immense social upheaval and cataclysmic change in the relationship between humans and the natural landscape. The arrival of the Portuguese—followed by the Dutch then the English—on South Africa’s shores was part of a process of forceful capitalist expansion at a global scale that was driven by Europe’s need to accumulate land, labour, and materials to fuel industrial growth. As in other colonial contexts around the world, these processes would profoundly transform the landscapes and societies of South Africa, and in many ways the South African experience is simply another variation of the continent’s violent experience of divide and conquer, seizure and removal (Mamdani 1996). Yet the permanent and substantial presence of White settlers in South Africa, the size and global importance of its extractive industries, and the emergence of the apartheid order set South Africa apart. In particular, the brand of capitalist despotism that took shape in South Africa was acutely marked by relentless accumulation and geographical reconfigurations that produced stark internal disparities to the advantage of those wielding economic power.

While the objectives, forms, and processes of colonialism varied widely from one context to another around the globe, it generally involved the acquisition of new territories

or access to their resources and the displacement, enslavement, or execution of people who voiced a prior claim to them (e.g., Harris 2002, Fairweather 2006, Hochschild 1999). Anti-colonial resistance, which also varied from one location to another, was very often formidable, and colonization therefore deployed a range of militaristic, legal, cultural, and discursive tactics that enabled the reorganization of social and economic space, the imposition of an increasingly centralized state with its attendant laws and private property rights, and an insistent rhetoric of improvement (Scott 1998, Harris 2002, Blomley 2003). Together, these processes acted to lever people away from their traditional lands and lifeways, coercing them, in varying forms and to varying degrees, into an imposed capitalist order (Fairweather 2006, Blomley 2003, Weaver 2006, Fanon 2008, Césaire 2000).

In South Africa, the early colonialism of the Dutch and Portuguese gave way to intensifying capitalism under the British. As capitalism took root in South Africa and grew, a standard development trajectory unfolded in which the leading economic sector shifted “from agriculture, to minerals, manufacturing and then services” over the course of the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries (Nattrass and Seekings 2011). While other regions have experienced a similar transformation, in South Africa, this shift involved a “set of unusually coercive and discriminatory policies and institutions that served both to constrain the economic opportunities open to African people and to depress the wages paid to the many African workers forced into unskilled employment” (Nattrass and Seekings 2011). These policies shaped South Africa’s culture and defined the development of its structural and institutional landscape, laying the foundation for the extreme inequality that culminated in the apartheid regime.

Apartheid, which intensified the systemic racial segregation and associated violence of the preceding centuries, involved a series of geographical and social transformations that

profoundly affected all aspects of economic, social, and environmental interactions throughout the country, over time becoming embedded in its very landscape (Fraser 2007, Ramutsindela 2007). Because segregation and apartheid were primarily systems aimed at expanding the capitalist mode of production in South Africa, they can be understood not only as structurally imposed systems of legalized racial violence, but also as an onslaught against labour, society, and environment by a particularly despotic brand of racist capitalism (Friedman 2015, Mamdani 1996).

Twenty years of democracy have done little to erase the geographical and social effects of South Africa's segregationist history, arguably thanks to the polarizing effects of contemporary neoliberal capitalism that, in the wake of apartheid, has further expanded economic divisions and intensified crime and civil unrest (Demombynes and Özler 2005, Gibson 2012, Hart 2008, Bond 2000, Desai 2002). These challenges are not confined to South Africa. While South African apartheid is a specific phenomenon that derived from the complex and uneven historical, cultural and racial formations within the country's political economy (Posel 2011), there are at the same time clear parallels between South African apartheid and the racialized global order established through historical processes of colonialism, imperialism and, most recently, globalized neoliberal capitalism (Biel 2000, Amin 1997). As former South African President Thabo Mbeki observed during his Welcoming Address at the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development, the globalized capitalism responsible for such disparity "has pity neither for beautiful nature nor for living human beings. This social behaviour has produced and entrenches a global system of apartheid. The suffering of the billions who are the victims of this system calls for the same response that drew the peoples of the world into the struggle for the defeat of apartheid in this country" (qtd. in Bond 2004, 817).

Global capitalism, like apartheid, has no classification of race, and no obsession with it. Yet in the segregated, heavily policed, and profoundly polarized terrain of the contemporary world, an independent and liberated Black African continent engages with the global economy on terms dictated by the White countries of the global North and according to historically-established disequilibria (Rodney 1981, Duffield and Hewitt 2009, Rist 2008). Within the global economy, Africans remain economically excluded and culturally maligned (Soske 2004, Ndikumana 2015). They are prevented from owning the means of production, trading on their own terms, or defining the rules of cultural or economic engagement with the broader world (Bond 2006). They face systematic racism, prejudice, paternalism, and neocolonialism, violation of their basic rights and the continual condescension of a White Saviour Industrial Complex that reiterates African poverty and helplessness as a means of advancing the interests of the West and the White (Cole 2012, Easterly 2013, Seay 2012). Throughout Western media and literature, the ongoing construction of Africans as dependent, incompetent, impoverished, and culturally simplistic, and the continual portrayal of the continent as a backwards, dangerous site of constant violence and dysfunction is a pernicious form of racism (Evans and Glenn 2010, Baker 2015). This racist ideology acts insidiously on the minds of Westerners and serves to justify neocolonial interventions in African nations by states and state-sponsored organizations of the global North (Yrjölä 2009). Thus, the condition of global uneven development is also the result of destructive cultural and discursive configurations that help maintain the unjust relationship between Africa and the North even as they obscure the underlying historical and political causes of Africa's underdevelopment.

In the climate of extreme censorship and police brutality that defined apartheid South Africa, poets were a visible and powerful cultural force within the independence

movement (Sitas 1989b, Van Dyk and Brown 1989, Cronin 1988). Their practice was inherently political; struggling against processes of colonialism, dispossession, and uneven development, they played a well-documented role in social commentary and political critique, their role as freedom fighters garnering them banning orders, police violence, detention, and the very real possibility of death (Kaschula 1991a, b, Kaschula 2002, Kaschula and Diop 2000, Opland 2005, O'Brien 2001, Opland 1998, Seddon 2008, Sitas 2012, 1989a, Qabula 1989). In embracing their vocation despite its inherent risks, poets responded with courage and humanity to the transformation of landscapes and societies to spaces of industrial capitalism, to the extraction and industrialization of human bodies that enabled this transformation, and to the resulting upheaval in relationships between humans and their environments. Aware of the power of their words to effect social and political change, they practiced a poetry that “stabs the heart of the enemy” while articulating the experiences of oppressed and dispossessed Black South Africans (Qabula 1989, 4). Thus, in challenging the extractive theft and racist violence inflicted on their communities and environments under colonialism, apartheid and neo-liberal capitalism, Black South African poets voiced their opposition to systemic injustices of exploitation and extraction. In the process, they provided an expression of a complex African environmentalism that recognizes the constitutive ties between capital, labour, and landscape, resisting not only the exploitation of African labour under the apartheid regime but also the environmental injustice that this subjugation represented (Caminero-Santangelo 2014).

This opening chapter provides a brief overview of the theories of political economy on which the research and analysis in this dissertation is based, making the case that literary work is an important aspect of these political processes, whether in resisting or championing them. I begin by defining capitalism and providing a cursory account of its development and

expansion in Europe and in colonial territories in order to illustrate the ways in which the expansion of capitalism and the corresponding entrenchment of systemic racism affected the geographies and environments of South Africa. In defining and characterizing capitalism, I present the patterns of uneven development, economic and social polarization, dispossession, and exclusion that capitalism inevitably produces. This discussion is not meant to be a rigorous presentation of the extensive debates on these topics; rather, in broadly examining the ways in which social patterns and priorities around the world have shifted to centre on the accumulation of capital, I argue that the capitalist mode of production dramatically reconfigures not only natural landscapes but also human relationships to nature, landscapes and to each other, irrevocably altering prior ways of living with the natural environment and other creatures.

Focusing on the case of South Africa and the ways in which racial segregation and apartheid have acted in service of capitalist expansion in the country, I consider the ways in which it represents a microcosm of a global system that, in maintaining poverty and exclusion in racialized global peripheries, perpetuates a system of racial injustice at a global level that is in many ways reminiscent of apartheid. Given the many ways in which capitalism reconfigures landscapes and human relationships with them, and the ways in which Western concepts of “nature” have been deployed in support of colonial and capitalist agendas, I argue that African literatures that assert African perspectives and criticize colonialism and capitalism in all of their forms are effectively versions of environmentalist literature that continue to play an important role in resisting these processes just as they have historically. Through this discussion, I show how the human and environmental consequences of capitalism are concealed by space (Soja 2011, 61, 63), how literature from the peripheries can

bring these consequences to light, and how literary resistance to capitalism is effectively a form of resistance against imposed systems of destructive injustice in all their forms.

Uneven development: the origins of exclusionary economics

Philosophers and political commentators have long remarked on the injustice of capitalism, a system that establishes and maintains inequality by condemning some to work while others profit from their labour (Beaud 2001, 58). While much debate surrounds the emergence and spread of the capitalist social formation, it is generally accepted to have emerged over a period of some 500 years, expanding and transforming within and beyond the European continent from the late fifteenth century to its current global, neoliberal form (Beaud 2001, Harvey 2005).

Under the capitalist mode of production, labour is worth more than workers are paid for it, and the surplus value created through this differential enriches the capitalist owners of the means of production, creating a wealth gap between owners and workers that widens over time (Marx 1990). Since the process of differential accumulation is inherent to capitalism, the exploitation and relative impoverishment of the proletariat is an inevitable aspect of the production of wealth (Marx 1990, Beaud 2001). This dynamic makes uneven development “the hallmark of the geography of capitalism:” it is an inevitable outcome of the capitalist system that repeats at all spatial scales (Smith 2008, 4). At both national and international levels, the displacement of acute poverty and other externalities to the periphery of national or international space is no accident: “In the peripheries of the capitalist system, poverty and unequal distribution of income are not negative effects produced by specific circumstances or mistaken policies. They are the product of the system’s logic, the logic of world polarization immanent in the system itself” (Amin 1997,

10). That is, uneven development and the resulting disparities in health, education, security, and economic wellbeing are not by-products of capitalism; capitalism actively produces disparities and is dependent upon unevenness and inequality for its success (Biel 2000).

The initial process of securing the masses of capital and labour needed for commodity production, known as primitive accumulation, is “the point of departure” from which the capitalist mode of production proceeds (Marx 1990, 873). As capitalism strengthened in industrializing England, primitive accumulation took the form of enclosure movements, harsh reprisals for vagrancy and other such measures specifically designed to alienate people from the land and the means of production and coerce them into a proletariat reliant on the capitalist economy (Hardt and Negri 2000, Bryceson 1996). The process involved rupturing existing social structures that had evolved to maintain stability in a land-based social order, freeing factors of production—land and labour—for exploitation and accumulation through their absorption into the capitalist system (Biel 2000).

During the mercantilist era of the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries, colonizing nations prevented their colonies from developing domestic industries in order to maximize their own exports of manufactured goods, which enabled industrial development at home (Biel 2000, 13). This policy resulted in the centralization of industry and manufacturing in the global North while colonized nations remained sites of extraction and primary production. By the mid-1700s, mercantilism had begun to give way to a new form of imperialism that owed “its unity to the development of industrial capitalism” (Cain and Hopkins 1996). Industrial capitalism accelerated throughout the nineteenth century, and the relentless expansion of the capitalist system in Europe inevitably took on “the political form of imperialism” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 221). As British imperialism gained ascendancy and England developed into the “workshop of the world,” core economic beliefs undergirding

its expansion were taken up as organizing principles for the world economy (Polanyi 2001). These beliefs included the “severe exploitation of the working masses” that enabled the rapid development of the “leading industries of the time: textiles, metallurgy, coalmining” (Beaud 2001, 102). The expansion of British capitalism was facilitated above all by the provision of abundant labour, which entailed separation of the labourer from the land and transformation not only at social and material levels, but at the psychic, spiritual, and creative levels as well:

What Marx seeks to establish beyond any shadow of doubt is that it is the appropriation of the form-giving fire of the labor process, the appropriation of all manner of creative possibilities and powers of the laborer (mental and cooperative capacities, for example) that allows capital to “be” in the world at all. But the internalization of these powers of labor as powers of capital at the point of production entails the transformation of the laborer into an appendage of capital, not only within production but in all spheres of mental, social, and physical activity. (Harvey 1996, 65)

Capitalism is characterized by the continual shifting and expansion of its boundaries through accumulative processes (Smith 2008). In the fifteenth century, as European land and labour became insufficient to the needs of emergent capitalism, colonial expansion was increasingly necessary in order for primitive accumulation to continue (Beaud 2001). Yet it was not only economic need that drove this expansion, but also the ecological contradictions that were becoming a central aspect of capitalism: the intensified “scale, scope and speed of ecological degradation” that accompanied the development of capitalism meant that European soils, forests, and other environments were quickly exhausted, necessitating

exploration and the colonization of other global regions (Moore 2003). While colonization was arguably driven by the need to resolve both economic and ecological dilemmas, the African slave trade made both colonization and capitalist expansion possible: during the early years of the colonial period, Europe was simply unable to spare any of its domestic labour force for the development of the colonies (Braudel 1992, 54). The land and labour of Latin America and Africa resolved the main constraints to the expansion of European capitalism. Together, these continents and their productive assets became the major contributors to European enrichment from the sixteenth century onward, permitting “the release of a huge mass of surplus value, which was appropriated in monetary form mainly by the traders, manufacturers, bankers and financiers of England” (Beaud 2001, 45). Throughout the history of European expansion, African labour—the bodies, minds, and souls of a newly-constructed global underclass—that served as fuel for Europe’s economic expansion and the enrichment of its capitalists.

Over the course of several centuries, capitalist expansion and ensuing uneven development successfully embedded a racial colour bar in the global economic system. In the contemporary era, historically-established patterns continue to define and restrict possibilities for development and equality: “Current developments suggest different possible scenarios, none of which questions the realities of North-South polarization. The commanding logic of the capitalist system perpetuates the centre/periphery polarization” (Scott 1998, 112). Development of the peripheries is not in capital’s interests and is not among its strategies (Amin 1997, 16). Biel explores this further, noting that:

Raw materials can be grabbed from colonies, neglecting the preservation of nature or the reproduction of the local labour which goes into producing them. Cash-crops forcibly grown in colonies can

be used to feed and clothe metropolitan workers, making their living costs cheaper so that capitalists do not have to pay them so much. The full cost of labour seems to be paid, but in reality it is subsidised by inputs that are not fully remunerated. So the pure monetary economy is partly an illusion, sustained by the unacknowledged informal, racial economy. Even the development of class relations in the centre was influenced by the international circuits of accumulation. In all these ways, the impoverishment of the working masses in the periphery is intensified. (Biel 2000, 20)

Uneven development is actively upheld in order to maintain hinterlands for resource extraction and to prevent these regions from developing into consumers of their own resources. Since it is impossible for all nations of the world to “simultaneously pursue a form of development (capitalism) which is inherently wasteful of resources and damaging in its pollution,” established powers exert tight control over the flow of capital to the global South in order to prevent the South from developing too quickly and “using the resources to catch up with the centre” (Biel 2000, 86). Thus, “not only are there not enough resources to go around, but the South must be kept as a *purveyor* of these resources. This can only be done by restricting their development, which might lead to their consuming their resources themselves” (Biel 2000, 67).

Although apartheid is a specifically South African phenomenon with cultural and historical particularities and formations that distinguish it from other locales, the case of South Africa provides a valuable lens from which to view broader patterns of racist capitalism:

Apartheid originated as a label for the system of institutionalised racism and racial social engineering inaugurated by the National Party after its election victory in 1948. But the term has since been appropriated as a global signifier of racialized separation, inhumanity and exploitation. International cross-references have the virtue of prompting a more global reading of apartheid as one among many projects of racialized discrimination and subjugation. (Posel 2011)

Like South African apartheid, the racist nature of global capital is complex and heterogeneous, yet overall, institutionalized racial segregation has been designed to ensure White economic prosperity and political dominance on a global scale.

Within this racialized global matrix, “developing countries” are those whose economic production is not on par with that of economically dominant countries. They are given the epithet not only for their absolute level of development but more specifically for their position in the global system. The notion of “developing country” emerged in the post-war period, during which time foreign aid grew in importance as a means of political control—a function openly acknowledged by political leaders. In 1962, John F. Kennedy asserted: “Foreign aid is a method by which the United States maintains a position of influence and control around the world, and sustains a good many countries which otherwise would definitely collapse, or pass into the Communist bloc” (qtd. in Beaud 2001, 247).

The new economic order that emerged in the post-war years was characterised by new labour dynamics in which it became clear that the social and economic evolution of the Third World would be unable to follow that of the first. To remain competitive, enterprises had to refine production techniques continually. Increasingly mechanized production led to ongoing changes in labour requirements as smaller numbers of skilled labourers were called

for. The ongoing declines in labour demand meant that absorption of surplus labour became impossible while “the safety valve of mass emigration is not available” in a contemporary world increasingly defined by the militarized control of human movement (Amin 1997, ix). According to Marx, this growing pool of surplus labour, which he termed an “industrial reserve army,” is a fundamental element of capital accumulation.

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour-power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.* Like all other laws, it is modified in its working by many circumstances, the analysis of which does not concern us here. (Marx 1977, 798, qtd. in McIntyre 2011)

Thus, as capitalism gained momentum, the proletariat created through the removal of people from the landscape and their separation from the means of production was ultimately surplus to the needs of capitalism, which helped mitigate labour costs for capitalists. In the contemporary world, “the relationship between the active workforce and

the labour reserve exploited by capital, which developed in the history of the centres, cannot reproduce itself in the periphery” (Amin 1997, 57). As a result, escalating tension and violence in peripheral regions where the bulk of the labour surplus is located is inevitable, particularly given the increasing economic disparity and class divisions inherent to neoliberal capitalism (Amin 1997).

Under the neoliberal framework that has come to define the global political economy over the past four decades, development has increasingly become synonymous with capital accumulation (Biel 2000, Rist 2014). Neoliberal foreign policy holds that developmental opportunities for poor countries are limited by their effective exclusion from world markets. In a capitalist framework in which “poor countries and their populations are held to be poor not because of the nature of the capitalist world system, but because of their effective exclusion from it” (Selwyn 2014, 1), these new conceptualizations of economic space emphasize the political repercussions of such exclusion. Neoliberal policy claims that the removal of market ‘distortions’ through liberalization policies would succeed in integrating them into the global marketplace, thereby “accelerating the human development of their population” (Selwyn 2014, 1). This residualist discourse

shifts our focus away from investigating how a particular type of economic system (capitalism) simultaneously generates poverty and wealth. It reframes the debate around the axiom that capitalism must, by definition, provide the solutions to the world’s poor, and that therefore, the problem of development is not the capitalist system itself, but exclusion from it. Through this discursive act capitalism remains a pristine non-object of analysis. (Selwyn 2014, 2)

Instead, Selwyn argues that the democratic ownership of wealth should become a central objective of development, not least because “labouring classes potentially can manage the economic affairs of humanity better than capitalist firms and states” (Selwyn 2014, 20).

In his theory of accumulation by dispossession, Harvey argues that primitive accumulation isn't a one-time event. Rather, it is an ongoing process within broader processes of capital accumulation that lie at the heart of neoliberalism. Hardt and Negri agree: “Primitive accumulation is not a process that happens once and then is done with; rather, capitalist relations of production and social classes have to be reproduced continually” (2000, 258). Furthermore, the exploitation of the global South that is ongoing in contemporary times “is still a ‘primitive’ form of accumulation, because it does not pay full value for the things it consumes”—resources and human labour are extracted without full economic compensation for their value (Biel 2000, 72). Developed, highly centralized capitals must constantly search for both cheaper sources of physical materials and cheaper sources of labour in an ongoing process of accumulation (Smith 2008, 187). Replicating itself on increasing scales, capitalism replicates patterns of racially-ordered exclusion and benefit at each level. In this way, “the unilateral logic of capital produces unemployment, impoverishment and marginalization. Nations want independence and dignity; the logic of global capital produces the opposite” (Amin 1997, 95). Clearly, colonialism is alive and well in today's world, albeit in altered forms that involve covert (or overt) political manoeuvres on the part of imperialist states to enable unfettered accumulation and political control (Gregory 2004, Perkins 2006). These tactics emerged as a natural and necessary transformation from nineteenth century to twentieth century imperialism, in which a new world order was produced by US economic and ideological hegemony.

Uneven development and the inequality inherent to capitalism are felt not only within and between regions but also within households and at the level of the individual. Like their European counterparts, amaXhosa women increasingly bore the brunt of capitalist relations and, confined as they were to increasingly overpopulated and degraded rural areas, capitalism's environmental effects as well (Mies and Shiva 2014). Their reproductive labour, rendered largely invisible and entirely unremunerated by the patriarchal orientation of capitalism, was indispensable to capitalism and its ongoing labour needs (Waring 1997, Mies 1998).

The nuclear family, organized and protected by the state, is the social factory where this commodity 'labour power' is produced. Hence, the housewife and her labour are not outside the process of surplus value production, but constitute the very foundation upon which this process can get started. The housewife and her labour are, in other words, the basis of the process of capital accumulation. (Mies 1998, 31)

Like the appropriated labour and resources of peripheral regions, this unremunerated input is necessary for capitalism to function, especially in circumstances where tight profit margins exist.

Neither housewives nor the nuclear family, the basic unit of consumption in the capitalist system, existed in precolonial amaXhosa society that, like other traditional societies, was organized around complex systems of obligation and reciprocity based on kinship and community ties. Transforming an autonomous, polygamous society in which women occupied a powerful spiritual position involved not only the structural processes described throughout this chapter, but also the conversion of cultural and spiritual priorities, largely through the imposition of Christian norms and morals, the missionary cult of women's

domesticity that confined women to subordinate roles within the household, and the institution of motherhood as narrowly defined by the church (Stevenson 2011). Colonialists and missionaries imposed new gender norms according to their economic and cultural priorities and, as amaXhosa people became increasingly incorporated into the capitalist economy, gender relations also shifted, reflecting a process that had taken place previously in Europe. Women's "transformation into housewives, dependent on the income of the husband, became the model of the sexual division of labour under capitalism. It was also necessary in order to gain control of the reproductive capacities of women, of all women. The process of proletarianization of the men was, therefore, accompanied by a process of houswifization of women" (Mies 1998, 69). Relegated to homesteads and rural areas that they were unable to leave without a pass, women were sequestered out of sight of the urban nodes of capital accumulation that they supported through their unpaid, subsistence labour.

South Africa's independence movement, which accomplished so much and at such great cost in terms of recalibrating racial relationships in South Africa and beyond, was much less successful when it came to addressing injustices at the level of the household and family. As I show in subsequent chapters, the independence movement did little to incorporate or address the specific concerns of women while the post-colonial South African state remains characterized by some of the highest rates of sexual violence found anywhere on the planet (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002, Naidoo 2014). Over several centuries, the cumulative processes of capitalism and its uneven production of urban nodes and undeveloped hinterlands have produced an entrenched colour bar that delineates racial zones of exclusion and benefit around the globe. Yet the current status of women in South Africa is also characterized by asymmetries of exclusion and benefit created through a long history of racist patriarchy that combine to undermine women's agency and voice. This situation limits the possibilities of

independence, of the potential of both women and men: in the dialectic of colonizer and colonized, both men and women are restricted from realizing their full human potential as a result of exploitative and dependent relationships that have yet to be overcome.

The case of South Africa

The racialized polarization that capitalism produces is poignantly exemplified on a national scale by the case of South Africa. In 2013, South Africa was ranked the fourth most unequal country for which data are available (HDRO 2013).⁵ By the time of its first democratic elections in 1994, some 350 years of settler colonialism had forged a strong capitalist economy built on mineral extraction that was sharply divided economically and politically along racial lines. Despite widespread hopes that democracy would bring about meaningful social and economic change, key aspects of South Africa's transition together with the polarizing nature of contemporary neo-liberal capitalism have combined to reinforce one of the most structurally unequal societies on the planet whose contemporary landscape is characterized by nodes of urban development surrounded by underdeveloped townships and rural hinterlands chequered with former Bantustans (Bond and Ruiters 2016). The contemporary Republic of South Africa "embodies within a single nation-state a relationship characteristic of the external relationship between imperial states and their colonies" (Friedman 2015, 128). Its geography of segregation and exploitation is a legacy of a colonial and economic history that, as Lefebvre puts it, "smashed naturalness forever and upon its ruins established the space of accumulation" (Lefebvre 1991, 49).

Systematic racial oppression and violence is the most familiar characteristic of South African apartheid and often appears to be its main organizing principle. Yet a simplified

⁵ Countries with Gini coefficients above 60 (where 0 represents perfect equality and 100 represents perfect inequality) include: Seychelles 65.8; Comoros 64.3; Namibia 63.9; South Africa 63.1.

racial construction conceals the dialectical interrelationships between labour and capital, society and environment that are apartheid's foundation. In the 1970s, as class consciousness emerged on shop floors around the country, Marxist scholars in South Africa began to articulate an understanding of apartheid as an integral component of South African capitalism. The emerging scholarship viewed apartheid not simply as racial segregation and domination but also as domination of capital over labour that directly benefitted capitalist growth (Friedman 2015, Wolpe 1972). Under this rubric, early colonial policies such as taxes, dress codes, and private property regimes were a means of imposing a capitalist system of class relationships and cash dependency. Later, the deportations, pass laws, and other trappings of apartheid were ways of further controlling Black labour for the benefit of White capital.

The forced removals, environmental degradation, and exploitation of non-industrial society that occurred under both colonialism and apartheid profoundly altered all aspects of economic, social, and environmental relationships throughout South Africa. The regime thus represents not merely structural and systemic racial violence, but also a prolonged onslaught against landscape and natural environment. Resistance to colonialism, segregation, apartheid and neoliberalism is thus resistance not only of oppressive political systems and economic orders that actively produce inequality and polarization, but also of systems of environmental injustice that have reorganized human relationships with land and environment and drastically reconfigured geography in the service of capital accumulation.

Colonial society emerged in the regions that form the modern Republic of South Africa shortly after the arrival of the Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Dias in 1488 during his search for a trade route to Asia. A subsequent trade mission by his successor Vasco da Gama successfully reached Southern Asia, which led to the establishment of a major trade

route around the Cape and frequent stopovers by Portuguese, British, and Dutch traders (Ross 2009). In 1651, the Dutch East India Company established a base in Table Bay, gradually building it from a trading post and refreshment station into a permanent base. For the next three centuries, European settlement in South Africa was largely confined to the Cape colony in and around the current location of Cape Town and was dominated by the Dutch.

While the seeds of South Africa's contemporary circumstances were planted with the arrival of the first Europeans on the Cape, it was not until the discovery of diamonds in Kimberly in 1867 and gold in the Witwatersrand in 1886 that industrialization—and its attendant uneven development—got underway in earnest. The mining magnate and politician Cecil John Rhodes—who founded the De Beers diamond company in 1888, became a parliamentarian in 1890, and served as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896—exemplified the linkage between capital and the South African state that have existed since the early days of British colonialism. One of Rhodes's primary motivators in politics and business was his professed belief that the Anglo-Saxon race was destined to greatness as, to quote his last will and testament, “the first race in the world” (Rhodes 1902, 58). Reasoning that “the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race,” Rhodes advocated vigorous settler colonialism to ensure “the birth of more of the English race who otherwise would not be brought into existence” (Rhodes 1902, 58). Regarding Africans in the Cape Colony, he wrote,

we have got to treat natives, where they are in a state of barbarism, in a different way to ourselves. We are to be lords over them. These are my politics on native affairs, and these are the politics of South Africa. Treat the natives as a subject people as long as they continue in a state

of barbarism and communal tenure; be the lords over them, and let them be a subject race and keep the liquor from them. (Rhodes 1902, 149)

These writings reveal the degree of Rhodes's White supremacy that, combined with his influential position in South Africa and England, placed him squarely in the position of "architect of apartheid" who laid the foundation for a century of institutionalized racism (Castle 2016). They also make it clear that although apartheid is generally blamed on the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, segregationist thinking is much older than the National Party, and Afrikaners were certainly not the only ones to view themselves as a chosen race.

The ideologies held by Rhodes and others of his class enabled the expansion of British imperialism, most notably through ideas surrounding property and land. British imperial contexts shared common land acquisition and allocation philosophies and practices that arose from cultural factors, most notably "a longing to hold and improve land [that] has been associated with leading chapters in English political, economic and intellectual history" (Weaver 2006, 22). English imperialism went hand in hand with its cultural priorities on the ownership and improvement of land: "In England, there had emerged by the eighteenth century understandings about property suited to a society thriving on commerce, governed by families with landed estates, and favoured with political stability" (Weaver 2006, 31). This ruling class not only took the private ownership of land as a given, they also "considered it their birthright to rule," and "did so by habit" (Mamdani 1996, 77). Thus, much more than just a mode of production and political economy, the capitalism established by imperial Britain is also form of social and cultural organization, involving the construction and maintenance of particular ideologies of property ownership as well as "the intervention of a collective authority representing capital as a whole" (Amin 1997, 15).

From the nineteenth century, racial economic disparities were increasingly imposed through a series of colonial and apartheid policies including restrictive land acts that reconfigured not only the pre-existing settlement patterns but also their associated social and environmental relationships. This geographical reordering was accompanied by increasingly draconian pass laws and influx controls that regulated the movements of Black South Africans. The first pass laws appeared in 1896 and aimed to address the problem of workers abandoning the appalling conditions of the town and worksites that had sprung up around the mines. As industrialization progressed, pass laws increasingly served an opposite interest, preventing dispossessed and impoverished rural people from relocating to urban areas. The laws effectively segregated male labourers, who were granted access to the Witwatersrand and other urban worksites, from their wives, children, and elderly relatives, who were confined to rural reserves where they survived primarily through subsistence agriculture.

Combined, reserves, relocations, and pass laws effectively converted the majority of the Black population to a migrant labour force forcibly separated from the White owners of the means of production. The seemingly dichotomous rural and urban spaces produced through this process of segregation are in fact nodes along a continuum of capitalist expansion that produces cities as manifestations of increasingly centralized power and wealth and rural regions as the corresponding entities of extraction and deprivation (Williams 1975, 291). The racial segregation and apartheid that resulted can be viewed as a further expression of extractive capitalism. While the liberal view claimed that being a migrant labourer was a choice, Marxists argued it was not: “For Marxism, the labour market is not an arena in which workers decide freely – they are dominated and so have few choices. Seeing the labour market as a realm of free choice hides the extent to which wage labour in general and

migrancy in particular are forced upon workers. Marxism's critics failed to understand the way in which social systems limit human choices" (Friedman 2015, 139).

Harold Wolpe explained this dynamic in terms of changing relations between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production in his landmark and controversial paper "Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid." In it, he described apartheid as a fundamentally capitalist project that ensured the steady reproduction and supply of labour power, arguing that

The supply of African migrant labour-power, at a wage below its cost of reproduction, is a function of the existence of the pre-capitalist mode. The dominant capitalist mode of production tends to dissolve the pre-capitalist mode thus threatening the conditions of reproduction of cheap migrant labour-power [...]. In these conditions Segregation gives way to Apartheid which provides the specific mechanism for maintaining labour-power cheap through the elaboration of the entire system of domination and control. (Wolpe, 1972)

In Wolpe's view, the racial segregation and apartheid that followed can be viewed as a further expression of extractive capitalism, with segregation marking a transition in relations between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. In the rural hinterlands, capitalism changed but did not destroy traditional systems and economies. Rather, traditional economies have continued to exist alongside capitalist modes of production and development, enabling capitalism to offload reproductive and environmental costs onto traditional societies (Luxemburg 2012). In apartheid South Africa, these costs were sequestered in the rural Bantustans, just as contemporary capitalism relegates these costs to the global South while reaping the benefits of cheap labour. The dynamics of these

coexisting modes of production verify Rosa Luxemburg's assertion that capital "cannot survive without the existence of non-capitalist societies to function as markets and sources of raw materials, labour etc." (qtd. in Smith 2008, 129). These dynamics also produce a separation of urban and rural, the former of which is held up as being progressive and modern, the latter, backward and traditional. Seen in this light, apartheid resistance became more than resistance of racial domination but also resistance against the domination of labour by capital. The use of economic power as an instrument of oppression combined with racist ideologies resulted in the particularly despotic social conditions of apartheid South Africa:

The problem in South Africa was not only that one race dominated another, but that economic and social power prevented people from expressing themselves as human beings and making free choices. [...] Apartheid was a symptom of a wider problem: the use of power by some to deny others the means to choose. (Friedman 2015, 99)

Wolpe's thesis flew in the face of established modernization theories "which held that racism was dysfunctional to capitalism and which moreover anticipated that it would crumble under the onslaught of market forces" (Beinart, Delius, and Trapido 1986, 10). Liberal theory, current at the time, saw apartheid as primarily an issue of White supremacy and maintained that although business would realize some degree of economic benefit from artificially depressed wages, apartheid would eventually undermine productivity and efficiency leading to economic decline (Nattrass 2014). Thus, Wolpe's work was deeply controversial—both in its contradiction of extant theory and its simplification of racism. Although the Marxist version gained considerable traction, adding a valuable new angle to the debate and inspiring an entire generation of scholars (Friedman 2015), the analysis was

susceptible to oversimplification as well. By reducing apartheid to a class struggle, scholars downplayed or negated the very real experience of racism from which Black South Africans were unable to escape. At the same time, Wolpe's work enabled Marxists to conceptualize apartheid in class terms and placed economic domination in a central role (Friedman 2015): more than simply a system of prejudice and bigotry, the poverty and exclusion that characterized apartheid were consequences of White economic power. These themes were taken up both by Wolpe's contemporaries and subsequent scholars who countered that the description of apartheid as a mere economic project was an oversimplification that ignored the daily experience of racial oppression and violence suffered by millions of people.

Marxism not only provided fertile ground for the work of social theorists, it also provided a framework for popular action. Particularly in the decades preceding the collapse of the Soviet empire, socialist concepts of economic equality offered an attractive and viable alternative that many revolutionary writers, scholars, and activists staunchly advocated. For example, when questioned about his socialist leanings, Steve Biko replied:

I think there is no running away from the fact that now in South Africa there is such an ill distribution of wealth that any form of political freedom which does not touch on the proper distribution of wealth will be meaningless. The whites have locked up within a small minority of themselves the greater proportion of the country's wealth. If we have a mere change of face of those in governing positions what is likely to happen is that black people will continue to be poor, and you will see a few blacks filtering through into the so-called bourgeoisie. Our society will be run almost as of yesterday. So for meaningful change to appear there needs to be an attempt at reorganizing the whole economic

pattern and economic policies within this particular country. (Biko 2004, 169)

Yet despite the hope of liberation movements and the promises of the Freedom Charter, “South Africa’s transition from apartheid has not seen a radical transfer of wealth or the creation of social programs based on human needs” (Gibson 2012, 53). Instead, it has seen the emergence of a new capitalist society that produces “three times more dollar millionaires than the global average and the fourth most in the world” (Gibson 2012, 53). The social and economic conditions of contemporary South Africa reflect the interruption of a radical liberation movement by capitalist interests that curtailed a more democratic distribution of South Africa’s wealth and the decolonization of its institutions (Bond 2000). Following Frantz Fanon, Gibson argues that decolonization is incomplete “if it is not waged on all levels: political, socioeconomic, geographical, and psychological; in short, at the objective and subjective levels” (Gibson 2012).

The neoliberal present

From the late twentieth century onward, South Africa, like other states around the world, experienced the rapid expansion and uptake of neoliberal policies. Neoliberalism is, first of all, a “macroeconomic doctrine” (Ferguson 2010) and “theory of political economic practices” (Harvey 2005) that promotes the ideals of individual liberty, the creative power of entrepreneurship, and the invisible hand of the market as the best ways to advance human well-being. In South Africa, it has involved “adherence to free market economic principles, bolstered by the narrowest practical definition of democracy (not the radical participatory project many ANC cadre had expected)” (Bond 2000, 1). Neoliberal ideology holds that markets must be free of government interference to operate efficiently; the role of the state

is primarily to create an hospitable institutional environment through the removal of trade barriers and financial regulations and the creation of markets in sectors where they do not yet exist (Harvey 2007, 2005). Meanwhile, “public values and any consideration of the common good are erased from politics, while the social state and responsible modes of governing are replaced by a punishing state and a Darwinian notion of social relations” (Giroux 2011).

In quantitative terms, neoliberalism has proven a lacklustre economic strategy, contributing little to overall growth (Harvey 2007). Instead, its real power lies in its role as a redistributive mechanism for funnelling wealth away for poorer nations and classes toward richer ones (Harvey 2007, Biel 2000). This process of redistribution has been enabled through what Harvey terms “creative destruction,” which involves “the dismantling of institutions and narratives that promoted more egalitarian distributive measures in the preceding era” (Harvey 2007, 22) and the transformation of “social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life, attachments to the land, habits of the heart, ways of thought and the like” (Harvey 2007, 23). As neoliberalism has become the dominant political and social reality for much of the world’s population, its values and discourse have overflowed from the economic realm, promoting the monetization of all aspects of social life and a preoccupation with the profitability of all aspects of productive and reproductive processes (Monbiot 2016). The result has been a fundamental shift in social narratives and cultural priorities and an overall reordering of our expectations, experiences, and interpretations of the world (Giroux 2011). This shift has had profound environmental consequences, as

connections between neoliberalism, environmental change, and environmental politics are all deeply if not inextricably interwoven. The

links are myriad, and include: (i) neoliberalism, though various and contradictory, tends not only to generate serious environmental consequences, but—drawing on classical liberalism—is significantly constituted by changing social relations with biophysical nature; (ii) neoliberalism and modern environmentalism have together emerged as the most serious political and ideological foundations of post-Fordist social regulation; and (iii) environmental concerns also represent the most powerful source of political opposition to neoliberalism. (McCarthy and Prudham 2004, 275)

On the African continent, neoliberalism is the latest iteration of an ongoing social and environmental pillage by colonizing nations that has included, but is not limited to trade by force dating back centuries; slavery that uprooted and dispossessed around 12 million Africans; land grabs; vicious taxation schemes; precious metals spirited away; the appropriation of antiquities to the British Museum and other trophy rooms; the nineteenth-century emergence of racist ideologies to justify colonialism; the 1884-5 carve-up of Africa, in a Berlin negotiating room, into dysfunctional territories; the construction of settler-colonial and extractive colonial systems – of which apartheid, the German occupation of Namibia, the Portuguese colonies and King Leopold’s Belgian Congo where perhaps only the most blatant – often based upon tearing black migrant workers from rural areas (leaving women with vastly increased responsibilities as a consequence); [...] poacher-stripped swathes of East, Central and Southern Africa now devoid of rhinos and elephants whose ivory

became ornamental material or aphrodisiac in the Middle East and East Asia; societies used as guinea pigs in the latest corporate pharmaceutical test... and the list could continue. (Bond 2006, 2)

As Patrick Bond's list illustrates, Africa as a whole has been left much worse off by its interactions with the rest of the world, and it continues to grow poorer as a result of its ongoing exploitation by them under the exigencies of deregulated economic growth (Bond 2006).

The global trend toward neoliberalization began in earnest in the decade preceding South Africa's transition to democracy and the independence movement shifted to accommodate its influence and demands. Now, in democratic South Africa as elsewhere, two decades of neoliberal policies have produced a situation in which upper and middle classes fare well at the expense of poorer ones, and where a formerly radical independence movement has been transformed into a neocolonial state unaccountable to the vast majority of its citizens (Harvey, 2007, p. 28; Peet, 2002). The result has been South Africa's emergence as one of the most economically polarized societies on the planet where, according to World Bank data, the poorest forty per cent of the population earns less than four per cent of the wealth in circulation in the country while the wealthiest ten percent earn more than half (Marais 2001, 7). Despite the tendency to speak of security as politically and economically neutral, in reality, "security always creates conditions for the élites to enjoy their wealth...the major aspect of any security system has always been to protect them against troublesome have-nots" (Biel 2000, 57). This is strongly felt in South Africa, where the uneven development imposed by racist capitalism is deeply conflictual and generates violence. The resultant crime and insecurity is disproportionately borne by the poor, who are

unable to afford private security and, given the often ineffective nature of state security and its uneven distribution, are “excluded from the security that the rich enjoy” (Biel 2000, 57).

The neoliberal discourse of the ruling and middle classes does not align with the sentiment of the majority of South Africans who fought and sacrificed for a socialist vision involving the democratic distribution of the nation’s land and wealth. In the years following the 1994 elections, the euphoria of democracy soon gave way to a widespread sense of disillusionment over social and economic realities and the failure to realize progress toward a more equitable distribution of the country’s considerable wealth. General disappointment at an unjust economic structure that has failed to change appreciably since the end of apartheid has found expression in rounds of often violent citizen protests (Gibson 2012). Gillian Hart claims that these “escalating struggles over the material conditions of life and livelihood are simultaneously struggles over the meaning of the nation and liberation, as well as expressions of profound betrayal” (Hart 2008, 678). On the other hand, given that the ANC has won a strong majority in each of five democratic elections in which the majority of the adult population has voted, others argue that the government is legitimate and reasonably competent, and that the narrative of a “sell-out” or “betrayal” is simplistic (Marais 2001, 5). Rather, the full story is tangled and complex, with many factors combining to prevent socialist ambitions from being realized (Bond 2000, Marais 2001). In any case, the ruling party’s shift from leftist to neoliberal values over the past two decades has contributed to the precipitous rise of corruption and crime in the country as neoliberal ideologies have become increasingly entrenched and the gulf between a prosperous middle class and an impoverished and excluded majority faction yawns ever wider.

Conscious resistance

Colonialism, apartheid, and neoliberal social transformations have never gone uncontested. Given the increasingly bleak social conditions that the majority of South Africans have faced over the past century and a half, it is no coincidence that escalating extraction and economic growth through the mid-twentieth century was accompanied by a political explosion. In Johannesburg, protests against the pass laws resulted in the infamous Sharpeville Massacres of 1960. The same year, revolts broke out in the rural Mpondoland territory in the northern Transkei. The 1980s were defined by labour uprisings escalating protests that brought an end to the apartheid regime. The decades since 1994 have also seen escalating social movements and widespread protests that reflect the country's political history as well as its current social and economic strife (Desai 2002, Brown 2015).

Resistance takes not only physical forms, but also ideological ones. Renowned contemporary African writers and activists provide clear evidence of the rapport between African arts and politics. Figures such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, Mzwakhe Mbuli, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are known for their politically significant literature that held the power to fundamentally shift ideologies. The political importance of their work is evidenced by efforts taken to silence them; Ngugi was forced into exile; Mbuli's poetry was banned; Saro-Wiwa paid for his activism with his life. While these writers were known well beyond their home communities, traditional literary practices—specific to a place, culture or language—are perhaps even more central to the health of civil society and democracy. In traditional society throughout the African continent, artists “enjoyed an enormous reputation as a class of intellectuals, who were respected for their wisdom and profound thought” (Agovi 1995, 48). South Africa's Black Consciousness movement, for example, encouraged political resistance by exposing different aspects of White ideological domination. As Robert Biel points out,

physical repression is merely one means of keeping people in order that “always has to be supplemented by ‘social control’, which is the mechanism by which people police themselves because they have internalised society’s norms” (Biel 2000, 252). By exposing and challenging these norms, Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko opened new possibilities for thought and actions.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, literature, oral poetry, and other forms of writing and performance were important forms of ideological resistance that operated in both traditional spaces and in the realm of organized urban protest. In *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*, Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner note that within traditional African society, “oral literature is part of a dynamic discourse that serves to analyse and comment on individual, group and class relationships. In particular, individuals in a variety of social roles articulate a commentary about power relations in society” (Furniss and Gunner 1995, 1). Words and oral texts are “invested with power,” they add, and “have the ability to provoke, to move, to direct, to prevent, to overturn and to recast social reality” (Furniss and Gunner 1995, 3). The power of traditional literary practices continues to be felt in present times in modern and traditional societies alike. South African poets, like Biko and others who took up the Black Consciousness movement, directly challenge political, economic and racial hegemony and internalized social control. The work of these poets formed part of a larger political project of cultural resistance that recognizes and challenges the ideological power of exploitative systems. In doing so, they “extend Shelley’s dictum that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world and George Oppen’s revision: that poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world” (Bernstein 2013).

Just as Steve Biko’s radical writings on Black Consciousness helped shift modes of thinking and bolstered apartheid resistance, so too can a sustained critique by artists and

literary practitioners from throughout the global South advance alternative modes of production, thinking, and social organization. In demanding justice and articulating the need for decolonization, equality, and the democratic distribution of wealth, writers in particular offer possibilities for hope and change. In challenging the extractive theft inflicted on their communities and environments under colonialism, apartheid, and neo-liberal capitalism, Black poets voice their opposition to systemic injustices of exploitation and extraction. In the process, they provide an expression of a complex form of environmentalism that recognizes the constitutive ties between capital, labour, and landscape, resisting not only the exploitation of Black South African labour under the apartheid regime but also the environmental injustice that this subjugation represented. Their work expresses an explicit concern with “lived environments, the social implications of environmental change, and the relationships between representations of nature and power” (Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 13). The work of these poets expresses the struggles and triumphs of the labourer, the migrant, the dispossessed—the actual producers of wealth—who remain systematically excluded from cultural representation in South Africa and beyond.

My investigation examines ways in which the material conditions of society and its modes of production have shaped human consciousness throughout South Africa’s modern history, while at the same time arguing that shifting ideologies, alternately reinforced or opposed by cultural configurations, have fundamentally affected geographies, environments, and economic systems in South Africa (Kapoor 2002). In particular, I consider the role of literary arts, which are more complex and nuanced than mere ideology or cultural artifact; they do not merely reflect material experience but rather exist in relationship to that experience that they help to shape and define. In seeking to represent the human condition and our day to day experiences of life, literary arts enable us to perceive ideologies and social

constructions that may be difficult to recognize otherwise, leading toward more complex understandings of society and informing public modes of engagement with it. Perhaps most importantly, literary arts clarify, express, and encourage emotions, which, in a world of social and environmental injustice, are of profound political importance (Barford 2017).

This dissertation is thus located at the nexus of Marxist and Romantic notions of human consciousness and creativity. While the Marxist view sees consciousness as being constrained by the political economy it resides within, which limits what we can imagine and what any given era can produce in terms of creativity and artistic practice (Eagleton 1976), the Romantic view sees human creativity as transformative, world changing, and our acts of creativity and emotion as capable of fundamentally shifting the orientation and operations of the political economy. Literature—particularly resistance literature—works at the point of tension between these two approaches. The political economy and its workings provide the impetus for the creation of resistance literature. However, rather than reproducing these antecedent structures, literature can act in opposition to them, superseding them and expressing an alternate vision. In the present work, I consider the general nature of poetics and the various ways in which poetry works on, with or against the patterns of thinking that underpin the structures that organize contemporary society.

Conclusion

Capitalism wins its popular support through a number of myths: that growth is guaranteed, that its benefits will trickle down, that poor countries are on a development trajectory that parallels but lags behind that of industrialized nations, and that economic growth will, ultimately, benefit rich and poor alike. Yet the notion that capitalist growth will produce equality and wealth for all is patently false; on the contrary, capitalism creates inequalities and

steadily widens them. In the contemporary world, the increasing polarization that has resulted from the intensification of this process is damaging for society as a whole as security is eroded and communities find themselves fragmented by the increasingly individualistic orientation of social life.

As one African nation after another gained independence from European colonial powers through the mid-twentieth century, people in the nascent post-colonial states soon discovered that political independence alone did little to free them from oppression. Instead, independence merely saw a transfer of political power from colonial officials to local bourgeoisie elites while much of the economic life of the country remained under Western imperial control. With control of fledgling democracies quickly seized by bourgeois elites, the euphoria of independence soon became disillusionment at the overwhelming social realities of underdevelopment, poverty and Western economic hegemony. Indeed, “it is a commonplace to observe and to say that in the majority of cases, for ninety-five per cent of the population of under-developed countries, independence brings no immediate change” (Fanon 2001, 59).

The geographical and political fact of independence has rarely brought about cultural and economic liberation. Even in independent states, dominant discourses and hegemonic ideologies continue to act in the service of empire, reproducing and justifying colonialist worldviews, describing and justifying perceptions and prejudices while masking economic and political imperatives that underlie capitalist systems of exploration, occupation, and knowledge acquisition. Crucially, cultural and economic domination, established during colonial times, created conditions for ongoing domination and exploitation even after political independence had been reached. The decolonization currently underway in South Africa “is the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This

includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 73).

In contemporary South Africa, as in the rest of the world, the conditions that enabled the establishment and rapid growth of capitalism from colonial times through the twentieth century have shifted dramatically. Landscapes, environments, and social and political systems and ideologies are all substantively different now than they have been throughout most of history. At the same time, deepening inequality has remained a constant trend, as has poverty, exclusion, and racial and gender subordination. These factors will be corrected neither by the current iteration of capitalism nor by its rhetoric of growth and inclusion because it is capitalism, with its racist, sexist, and ableist baggage, that produced these challenges to begin with.

Chapter 2: The political ecology of isiXhosa literature

While many of us are relieved by the fact that entrenched European colonialism has to a certain extent died out, a new menace has appeared on the scene: The American or European academician, with camera and tape recorder, running hither and thither, collecting material for his latest book on African literature.

~ A.C. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature*

Introduction

Prior to European contact, the tip of the African continent that forms present-day South Africa was peopled by a variety of cultural and ethnic groups. The various San or Bushmen nations⁶ (e.g., !Kung, |Xam, †Khomani), are descendants of the earliest human inhabitants of the region who had lived in southern Africa for some 200,000 years (Mallick et al. 2016). These peoples lived for generations as hunter-gatherers ranging across southern Africa before they began to be displaced by arriving pastoralists. The origins of the Khoi people are unknown, but they are thought to have migrated from present-day Namibia or Botswana with domesticated herds that they had acquired through contact with pastoralist peoples (Smith 1990). The Khoi settled throughout the area that is now the Western Cape and were the first South Africans to come into contact with Europeans—first the Portuguese then the Dutch—as the latter arrived and settled in the area around Table Bay. Around 1500, Bantu-speaking peoples joined South Africa’s ethnic blend as they moved south with their cattle

⁶n.b. Both of the term “bushman” and “San” are derogatory, however “San” is currently the most commonly used referent in academic, advocacy and political circles” (Ellis 2015, 123; see also, Raper 2012, Staff reporter 2007).

from the Great Lakes region of East Africa. This migration was part of the Bantu expansion that had begun in the borderlands of Nigeria and Cameroon some 4500 years earlier and resulted in the settlement of most of the subcontinent by farmers (Beleza et al. 2005, Reader 1997).⁷

This brief historical account hints at the relationship that humans have developed with South African landscapes over millennia, illustrating how human modes of living and interacting with the South African environment changed continually over time as new migrants introduced different livelihoods, languages, and cultural and spiritual practices. Yet all of these peoples lived in close contact with the diverse landscapes, vegetation, and animals of the lands they inhabited. It was not until the arrival of Europeans from the sixteenth century onward that changes to human ways of relating to each other and to the landscape around them became increasingly drastic. In pre-colonial times, South Africa was home to dense populations of large mammals—elephants, rhinos, giraffes, many species of antelope, zebras, buffalo, and lions—enormous quantities of birds and fish and some of the most complex and diverse plant communities found anywhere in the world. The arrival of Europeans, with their horses, firearms, and superior killing capacity, quickly saw “what was once one of world’s largest concentrations of mammalian fauna steadily reduced to a tiny fraction of what it had been” (Ross 2009, 200). Europeans also began changing the landscape itself, establishing towns, cities, and networks of roads, converting complex ecosystems to simplified cropping systems and setting up extractive industries that altered not only the biota of the country but vast expanses of its very bedrock as well (Essl et al. 2015). The settlers’ herds of cattle and sheep continued the environmental effects that had

⁷ Note that the term “Bantu,” here denoting a linguistic category and historical term, has echoes of its derogatory use throughout the apartheid period. Although “bantú” simply means “people” in isiXhosa, in other contexts the word carries highly-charged political and emotional baggage, particularly for South African Blacks.

begun with the earlier arrival of pastoralists, but on a dramatically increased scale. As the rural landscape was parceled into private allotments, human settlement patterns changed, new species of introduced plants proliferated rapidly while the erection of tens of thousands of kilometres of fences changed the movements and presence of game resulting in dramatic changes to plant communities (Niemandt and Greve 2016, Corrigan et al. 2010).

The speed of transformation escalated further from the late eighteenth century onward as the British took control of the Cape colony and began a relentless annexation and colonization of land and resources. The violent changes wrought on the people, animals and environments of South Africa reflected the upheaval that British and European society was experiencing at the time. Capitalism had become the dominant mode of production throughout Europe and the subsequent industrialization of Britain was in turn transforming its own home landscapes, social structures and cultures (Polanyi 2001, Lawrence 2003, Cain and Hopkins 1996). In this economic climate, the categories and distinctions that had been important in the Dutch colony on the Cape—distinctions “between ‘Christian’ and ‘heathen,’ between ‘slave’ and ‘free,’ between ‘burgher’ and ‘company official,’ or between ‘burgher’ and ‘Khoesan’”—increasingly became simplified into a division between two primary colours: Black and White (Ross 2009, 196).

This chapter introduces the people at the centre of the present study, namely the amaXhosa and their poets, and the methodologies with which I approach their literature. I begin by presenting some basic details of the traditional culture, genealogy, environment and language of the amaXhosa, reserving historical events following the arrival of Europeans for subsequent chapters. This discussion is far from exhaustive and is meant to provide a basic framework of the cultural and historical context in which the present work is grounded. From a brief discussion of cultural, linguistic and environmental considerations that are

important to the study, I move into a brief overview and discussion of the tradition of the imbongi and the izibongo genre, providing a contextual foundation that I will build upon in subsequent chapters. The introduction to the imbongi provided in this chapter is a generalized description based on past scholarship. The research I present in subsequent chapters complicates some of this previous work, challenging anglocentric literary interpretations while insisting on the importance of the spiritual and healing roles of the iimbongi and their poetry.

The second section of the chapter lays out the methodologies with which I approach the literature. I describe the general workings of poetry, its materiality, and the ways in which it acts at emotional, intellectual, and material levels, performing genuine work. Taking up the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, my analysis works with the tensions and intersections of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism, paying particular attention to the social, political, and historical context of the literary works in question and the ways in which literary engagement with the human realm also reflects the nature of human relationships with the environment. This section provides an overview of the concerns of the disciplines and the approach I use in this dissertation and concludes with a brief description of the field methods used alongside these methodologies of literary analysis.

The amaXhosa and their literature

The amaXhosa are a diverse group of isiXhosa-speaking kingdoms that includes the amaGcaleka, amaRharhabe, amaMpondo, abaThembu, amaBomvana, amaXesibe, and amaMpondomise whose traditional lands cover much of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. The various amaMfengu groups, while isiXhosa-speaking, have a complex identity distinct from other amaXhosa that derives both from their historical roots as Zulu-speaking

refugees fleeing King Shaka's Mfecane and their relationship with the British (Opland 1983, Fry 2010, Lester 1997). While they have been more or less absorbed into amaXhosa society, the amaMfengu have often remained marginal and were early adopters of Christianity and frequent allies of the invading British (Opland 1983, Lester 1997). EmaXhoseni, the lands traditionally inhabited by the amaXhosa people, is a fertile and biodiverse region that consists largely of temperate grasslands on shallow clay soils that are better suited to livestock than intensive cropping (Peires 1982, Dold and Cocks 2012). The region spans four climatic zones running parallel to one another between the Indian Ocean and the mountains that separate the coastal zone from the dry interior plateau (Peires 1982). Like their amaZulu neighbours to the northeast, the amaXhosa lived as settled agrarians with cattle at the heart of their culture—a lifestyle for which their undulating landscape, a varied blend of well-watered bushveld and pasturage, is ideal (Reader 1997, Peires 1982). While many amaXhosa settled in the coastal area, the majority

lived in the “highlands,” the slopes of the smaller mountains such as the Winterberg and the Amatola, where innumerable streams and rivulets drain into the great rivers of Xhosaland, the Fish, the Keiskamma, the Buffalo and the Kei. These river basins contain the richest and deepest soils, and the mixed pasturage (*Valley Bushveld*) is composed of both sweetveld and sourveld. This region also gets the highest rainfall, averaging 800-1200 millimetres per year with some places such as Pirie in the Amatola getting as much as 2000 millimetres. (Peires 1982, 2; emphasis in the original)

Each of the amaXhosa kingdoms takes its name from an ancestor from which the lineage is descended and each traditionally occupied a different area; the amaGcaleka and

amaRharhabe resided in the south between the Sundays and Mbashe rivers, the amaMpondo near the border of what is now KwaZulu-Natal, the abaThembu occupying the northern interior of the province, and so on (Opland 1983). Each kingdom has its own unique history, genealogy, dialect, and set of cultural and livelihood practices specifically adapted to its home place. While some scholars (e.g., Peires 1982, Opland 1983) have highlighted these differences by limiting their definition of amaXhosa to those groups who trace their lineage to the ancestor uXhosa (i.e., the amaGcaleka and amaRharhabe kingdoms), in this study I use the term amaXhosa to refer to all groups who speak the isiXhosa language. This approach more accurately reflects the way in which amaXhosa self-identify than do former terms such as Southern Nguni, which are seen as patriarchal in a decolonizing South Africa. I hope that this loose use of the term simplifies what could easily become a pedantic exercise in repeatedly distinguishing between various kingdoms and chieftaincies while at the same time respecting the fact that many unique lineages, dialects, and identities coexist within the amaXhosa nation.

The amaXhosa kingdoms are in turn made up of chiefdoms, villages, and clans. Chiefs, particularly the paramount chief (king), preside over their traditional territories by sacral and hereditary right. Their position is patrilineal, yet the hierarchies of leadership are complex: “all sons of chiefs were chiefs, and they were ranked according to the rank of their mother” (Peires 1982). Traditionally, and in contemporary rural society, everyone lived in a chiefdom and the relationship between the chief and his people held ritual significance (Opland 1983). The sacred aspect of chiefs must not be underestimated, as he is,

in fact, the symbol of tribal unity; in his person all the complex emotions which go to form the solidarity of the tribe are centred—he *is* the tribe. His position, however, is not one of exclusive privilege. It

also entails obligations. By sacrifice and magic he is responsible for the welfare of the tribe and the interests of all its members [...] Much of the chief's power stems from mystical sources. He holds the position hallowed from time immemorial and is the direct descendant of the mythical founders of the tribe whose powerful spirits are ever watching over the fortunes of their children. (Hammond-Tooke 1954, 34, qtd. in Opland 1983)

Clans are a further important division in amaXhosa society. The clan name, *iziduko*, is additional to a person's surname and reflects a further ancestral affiliation shared with a larger group than the immediate family. Traditionally, exogamy rules forbid intermarriages between members of the same clan, thus villages and chiefdoms would both include members of various clans (Peires 1982). A person's clan name, *isiduko*, can be used as an alternative name that places a person within "the more distant genealogical context of his clan, an affiliation that he shares with individual members from many other nuclear families living in his location and elsewhere" (Opland 1983). For example, Nelson Mandela is often referred to by his clan name *Madiba*, as a gesture bestowing honour on both Mandela and the ancestor for whom his clan is named.

The second most widely-spoken language in South Africa after *isiZulu*, *isiXhosa* is one of a collection of four Nguni languages in South Africa—including *isiXhosa*, *isiZulu*, *isiSwati*, and *isiNdebele*—that, combined, are the mother tongue of some 15 million people (Maake 1991). The Nguni languages are in turn part of the Bantu language group spoken by peoples across sub-Saharan Africa, an area stretching from the Cameroon coast east across the continent to Kenya and south to the Cape (Maho 1999). The current distribution of Bantu languages is the result of eastward and southward expansions of Bantu-speaking

peoples from what is now the Cameroon-Nigeria borderland across Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa beginning about 5000 years ago (Rexová, Bastin, and Frynta 2006, Berniell-Lee et al. 2009, Beleza et al. 2005, Gunnink et al. 2015). The total number of Bantu languages is unknown—in part because in many cases it is difficult to draw a clear line between languages and dialects and in part because of the marginalization of African languages as a whole—however experts put the number of languages at about 500, which are spoken by some 240 million people in twenty-seven African countries (Marten 2005, Maho 1999). When Bantu peoples reached the lands that are currently South Africa around the beginning of the sixteenth century, they encountered Indigenous Khoi and San peoples, and the interaction between Bantu-speaking peoples and the local Khoisan-speaking groups resulted in the transmission of clicks into the Nguni languages. In many Khoisan languages, the percentage of click words may be over sixty percent; in isiXhosa and isiZulu clicks are present in about fifteen to seventeen percent of words (Gunnink et al. 2015).

IsiXhosa is an agglutinative language in which various prefixes and suffixes are joined to root words to alter their meaning. For example, “ukufunda” is the infinitive form of the verb “to study” or “to read,” “ndiyafunda” is the gerund “I am studying” while “andifundi” is the negative “I am not studying,” “umfundi” is a student and “umfundisi” is a priest, “ukufundela” means “to study for” and “ukufundisa” “to teach,” while “ukufundisana” means “to teach each other” and so on. Like other Bantu languages, isiXhosa nouns fall into classes; based on the class of the subject noun, other words in the sentence will be given prefixes or suffixes to make concords. Most Bantu languages have about fifteen or sixteen noun classes arranged in about ten singular/plural pairings (Maho 1999). IsiXhosa itself has six singular classes, six plural classes and two abstracted classes which lack plural forms. In isiXhosa,

the noun (isibizo) dominates the sentence (isivakalisi) and any verb (isenzi) or word following or associated with a noun has to show concordance (or agreement) to that noun through alliterative sounds, called concords. These concords (izivumelanisi) are formed from the prefix (isimaphambili) of the noun and contain similar-sounding letters to the noun prefix (isimaphambili), thereby providing alliteration to the sentence. (Bryant 2007)

The concords involve subject and object, possessive pronouns, adjectives and verbs among others. By way of example, here are two sentences that illustrate the ways in which prefixes are added to noun, verb and adjectival stems to create concords within sentences:

Abantwana bam abahle bayadlala. – My beautiful children are playing.

Umntwana wam omhle uyadlala. – My beautiful child is playing.

These sentences show how the root word for child, “-ntwana,” changes class depending on whether it is singular or plural while the prefixes of associated adjectives, possessives and verbs are altered accordingly. Similarly,

Inja yam entle iyadlala. – My beautiful dog is playing.

Izinja zam ezintle ziyadlala. – My beautiful dogs are playing.

Clearly, the arrangement of concords makes the language highly alliterative. The agglutinative structure also enables any given word to express a single object or idea or to contain complex sets of relationships and ideas in a compound that may be the equivalent of multiple English words. The result is that in many cases complicated concepts or even simple actions can be expressed much more succinctly and eloquently than in English. For example, during an interview with King Zwelonke, I asked a question that he had answered previously and Zwelonke’s graceful reply was, “Besendibethile,” “We have already discussed

that.” This single word contains the verb, the past tense, the collective subject of the action, the direct object, and a sense of polite formality and eloquent dignity captured in the slightly archaic form. The isiXhosa language is thus well-suited to poetic diction in its musicality, inherent alliteration and subtle conveyance of conditional, subjunctive, past, and future tenses. Like any language, it is also rich in idiom and figurative constructions, many of which derive from amaXhosa connections with their environments (Dold and Cocks 2012).

The eighteen forms of clicks in the isiXhosa language give the language a particular character and they are often used alliteratively by iimbongi. In the written language, clicks are denoted through combinations of Roman consonants. Principally, there are three clicks enunciated with varying degrees of nasality or aspiration. “C” alone or in combination with other consonants (ch, nc, etc.) denotes forms of the frontal click, in which the tongue is sucked against the back of the front teeth to make a “tsk” sound. “Q” (qh, gq, etc.) indicates a palatal click, in which the tongue is sucked against the roof of the mouth then snapped away sharply to produce a loud pop or egg-cracking sound. “X” (xh, nx, etc.) indicates a side click, in which the side of the mouth is clicked against the molars to produce the clicking or clucking sound one might make to call a horse. In the isiXhosa language, “h” is always voiced and indicates aspiration, thus “ph” is an aspirated “p,” rather than an equivalent of “f” while “th” is an aspirated “t,” not the English equivalent of “this” or “then.” “R” or “rh” is a guttural sound produced in the back of the throat, similar to the Scottish “ch” in “loch”. Other consonants unfamiliar to English readers are the combinations dl, hl, tl, and ntl. In these combinations, the consonant is voiced with the tongue pressed against the front teeth while air is blown out on either side.

Since the arrival of Europeans in South Africa, African languages have steadily absorbed their words. This applies to objects and concepts that were unknown prior to

colonization and thus required new words (e.g., itafile, “table”) as well as pre-existing terms for which an anglicized word is frequently substituted (e.g., ndirayiti, “I’m all right,” in lieu of the traditional ndiphilile, “I’m fine”). In other cases, new words have been created as required by changes in society and technology. Isithuthuthu, a motorbike, is a well-known example, the alliteration reminiscent of the sound of the engine. Linguistic hybridity is particularly evident in townships, where the proximity of other languages and cultures has resulted in lively slang terms. One example is “ublomer phi?” a slang variant of the standard isiXhosa “uhlala phi?” “where do you live/stay?” that derives from the Afrikaans “blom,” “to bloom.” While iimbongi make use of these slang terms, they are particularly known for their use of “deep Xhosa,” an archaic form of the language largely unalloyed by the colonial languages of English and Afrikaans. The use of “deep Xhosa” is an important aspect of the social, cultural, and emotive power of iimbongi and their work.

Iimbongi and the izibongo genre

In amaXhosa society, oral poetry has a long association with leadership and plays a respected role in social commentary and political critique (Kaschula 1991a, 2001, O'Brien 2001, Opland 1998, Seddon 2008, Sitas 1989b, Nesor 2011). Historically associated with chiefs and monarchs, iimbongi (the plural form of the noun) have traditionally acted as court poets who work in the panegyric poetic form common among South African cultures and throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Panegyric, recognized as a particularly sophisticated and well-developed poetic genre, is an “intermediary between epic and ode, a combination of exclamatory narration and laudatory apostrophizing” (Finnegan 1976, 121). Traditionally, the local imbongi was a political figurehead, unique in his license to publically criticize leadership with impunity (Opland and McAllister 2010). As mediators between public and political realms,

iimbongi observed, interpreted, and represented society in order to help maintain social organization and balance. Their multiple roles include contributing to cultural cohesion and the maintenance of cultural tradition, holding leaders to account to the people they serve and inspiring courage and unity among community members, particularly in times of strife (Neser 2011, Finnegan 1976).

The standard translation of iimbongi is “praise poets” or “praise singers,” and their poetic genre, izibongo (singular: isibongo), “praise poetry.” In the amaXhosa context, these terms are misleading; a nuanced and highly political artistic medium, izibongo (singular isibongo) are as likely to be filled with barbs as praise, and deal “with praise and blame as twin aspects of truth-telling,” with the central aim being “to fearlessly evoke the subject’s true character” (Opland 1998, 89). Nevertheless, the terms capture the spirit of the poems, which are traditionally a blend of artful critique and laudatory apostrophe, lofty in diction, rich in figurative language and replete with references to historical characters and events. While there are many contemporary exceptions, izibongo are traditionally eulogistic in nature, rather than the epic or narrative form more common to oral traditions of the west (for example Homer’s *Odyssey* or *Beowulf*), and are spontaneously composed in direct response to the circumstances, events or people at hand (Yali-Manisi 2015, Opland 1983).

The rich, allusive, and sophisticated language that characterizes izibongo is vital to its political role in which “poetry is employed as an act of communication and sometimes even defiance between individuals and groups in the power structure...Because this communication often occurs in politically sensitive and even volatile situations the subtle use of language and metaphor is critical” (Kaschula 1991b). Rich in metaphor, allegory, imagery, proverbs, and allusion, the language of the iimbongi enables political commentary that is often elliptical or implied, rather than overt. The unexpected juxtapositions and linkages

invite a momentary departure from the everyday world, enabling the poet's audience to perceive reality in startling new ways, provoking insights and reconfigured ideas (Scheub 2010). While much of the commentary is clear and resonant to the imbongi's audience, the culturally-specific nature of the poetic devices means that the full power of the words is muted or even inaccessible to outsiders. The recitation of names—surnames, clan names, ancestral names, praise names, names of prized oxen and cattle—forms the backbone of the izibongo genre, further complicating it for outsiders unfamiliar with specific lineages and histories (Opland 1998, 1983). However, as Opland points out, praise names are often commemorative of a person's attributes or accomplishments and may refer to specific events (Opland 1983). The original reference may be lost over time, while the enigmatic praise name remains. This means that the names may be obscure even to amaXhosa audiences, though their literal meanings may inspire curiosity and speculation.

It is especially important to note that in amaXhosa society, the imbongi fulfils a complex role that spans spirituality and spiritual healing as well as the political and social roles that have been particularly emphasized by literary scholars (e.g., Kaschula and Diop 2000, Nesor 2011). Certain conventions surrounding iimbongi reflect these spiritual aspects. For example, iimbongi may carry assegais or knobkerries and their distinctive attire, which may include skins or traditional fabrics, beads of particular colours, distinctive skin hats or beaded headdresses, is reminiscent of that worn by amagqirha, traditional healers. Similarly, the roaring, guttural voice often used in performing izibongo is much like that of the amagqirha, who are moved by a similar spirit (Mpupha 2016). While female amagqirha are common, historically women have been unable to serve as iimbongi because of traditions that circumscribe their speech, forbidding them from uttering the names of living and ancestral chiefs (Nxasana 2016). Particularly noteworthy are commonly practiced forms of

respectful speech known as hlonipha that prevent women not only from speaking the names of their husband's ancestors (and by extension their own married surnames) but also words that are alliterative with these names, leading to elaborate languages of allusion and avoidance. As the izibongo genre is based on the incantation of genealogies, praise names, clan names—invoking beneficent ancestral spirits by pronouncing their names—there is clearly a conflict of traditions when it comes to women and poetry. On the other hand, intsomi, another amaXhosa literary form, can only be spoken by women. Commonly known as folktales or fairy tales, intsomi are told to children within the domestic spaces of household and family. Much more than stories, however, these tales convey the moral and spiritual values by which people in amaXhosa society are expected to live. Thus while the literature of public spaces remains largely the purview of men, tradition also restricts male speech in household spaces.

Methodologies

This dissertation examines the cultural and environmental politics of isiXhosa literature produced between the early twentieth century and the present. While Western society sees literature primarily as a written form of expression, throughout most of the world and most of history, literature has been an oral art. My investigation is therefore grounded in a broad definitions of literature as an oral and written art in which “*what* is said is taken in terms of *how* it is said” (Eagleton 2013, 3) and poetry as “language sung, chanted, spoken, or written according to some pattern of recurrence that emphasizes the relationships between words on the basis of sound as well as sense,” generally through rhythm and metre as well as various literary and linguistic devices (Baldick 2008). That is, in a literary work, language is not merely a vehicle for content but a constitutive part of meaning, with form playing a vital role.

The importance of form makes literature very different from technical or commercial communications in which the text primarily serves the functional purpose of conveying information clearly and succinctly. Unlike such texts, whose primary purpose is to clearly convey a specific point or fact, literature may be ambiguous or open to interpretation. A literary work opens new possibilities of thought and reality as it “is not subject to closure in the same way that more analytic forms of thinking are. There are always choices and possibilities, perpetually unresolved tensions and differences, subtle shifts in structures of feeling all of which stand to alter the terms of debate and political action” (Harvey 1996, 28).

In this study, I approach poetry with an attention “to language in all of its material density,” recognizing that “the language of a poem is constitutive of its ideas” (Eagleton 2007, 2). From this standpoint, my research takes up a philosophical concern with the political work performed by literature in general and poetry in particular. In their representative and affective power, “poems are material events and fields of force” (Eagleton 2007, 90) whose imaginative work involves “rearrang[ing] categories of thought” and “world-making” that can help reconceive and reconstruct “the human relationship to the more-than-human world” (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 5). Following Attridge (2015), I argue that “literature does make something happen in the material sense, not just the passive expression/reflection of modes of production and material conditions.” Specifically,

I’m a different person from what I would have been had I never picked up a book or attended a play. A society in which art has flourished is not the same as one in which it has been stifled. But since these literary effects arise from a multiplicity of singular experiences and the changes they produce may not be registered consciously, it’s impossible to predict or accurately chart them. And it’s important to register that they

may be changes for the bad as well as for the good, since the openness to alterity that I'm suggesting lies at the heart of both artistic production and artistic reception means that there is no possibility of knowing in advance what one is opening oneself to. It also means that the value of art can't be instrumentalized; as soon as a critic—or a regime—seeks to specify in advance the kind of experience the work of art should produce, it is programming what is inherently and constitutively unprogrammable. (Attridge 2015, 7)

Textual elements—genre and form, setting, language, style, tone, alliteration, metaphor—are of fundamental importance to literature because of what they contribute to the content and to the audience's response to and emotional understanding of that content. This is particularly true of poetry. While literature in general and poetry in particular operate discursively, engaging with ideologies and ideas, the emotional effect of poetry, the work it does, is also tightly linked to its materiality. As Carper and Attridge explain:

Often the pleasures to be gained from the *sounds* and *rhythms* of words are more important to the poet than the literal meanings of the words—in fact, the sounds and rhythms *create* meaning. [...] [U]nlike prose which, in its usual forms is a linear presentation of facts, poetry is a physical medium whose meaning derives from meter and rhythm as well as from its content. Formal aspects are of fundamental importance to emotional effect and to the *work* that poetry does. (2003, 6-10)

Thus the sounds, beats and rhythms of spoken language and particularly poetic language are not simply discursive: they are experienced physically. This is particularly true of izibongo, a performed, spontaneous form that is visual as well as aural, often performed unexpectedly

and often roared at high volume by a figure dressed in skins, beads, porcupine quills, traditional garments or other distinguishing attire. As described previously, the isiXhosa language is poetically alliterative, richly textured with clicking and aspirated consonants, figurative language and poetic terms that are experienced physically and conceptually by both audience and performer. Each performance is novel and the poems are particular to the people and events at hand. The combined effect of sound, language, and visuals works on its audience in profound ways and listeners are at liberty—they are, in fact, expected—to voice their enthusiasm for the performance through cheers and ululations, which act as a sort of reverberation of the physical work of the poetry. These material aspects affect the emotive, intellectual and perceptual qualities of the work such that poetry exists as both material and symbolic entity in which content is inseparable from form, sound, rhythm, and texture.

When it is transcribed, much of the physical effect of izibongo is lost, as is the active exchange between the participants in the performance. To some extent, the rhythm and sounds of the oral poetry are captured in the text and can be reproduced by reading aloud. However, once the transcribed poem is translated, the text bears little resemblance to the original performance. It is difficult to translate form, content and meaning together, particularly since figurative language and idiomatic expressions vary markedly from one cultural and linguistic context to another. Translators are generally forced to make compromises between language and meaning which may profoundly affect the reader's understanding of the text and their overall experience of the poem. Jeff Opland describes how, in translating isiXhosa texts to English, he often struggles with the best way of conveying figurative language that would be meaningless if translated literally to English (Opland 2015). At the same time, much is lost in translating a figure of speech that may involve creatures or objects particular to isiXhosa landscapes into a familiar English

equivalent. Finally, the drastic change in the texture of sounds, sentence structure, and words fundamentally alters the meaning and effect of the poetry since “a word is able to denote only through its complex interrelations with other words [...] because poems are peculiarly compressed structures of language which exploit to the full the criss-crossing affinities between their various elements” (Eagleton 2007, 51).

The translated transcriptions that form the basis of my analysis are therefore fundamentally different texts than the performed isiXhosa originals. Furthermore, my position as an outsider, unfamiliar with cultural references and idioms as well as unable to read the language without a dictionary or to understand the nuances conveyed through word choice, verb tenses, imagery, and allusions, places additional limitations on my analysis. Nevertheless, I feel that the social and political value of oral and African language poetry and their importance to the fields of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory are such that it is worth struggling against the limitations of my cultural and linguistic understanding. I hope that the benefits to be gained from the study of these literatures outweigh the risk that I may fail to do justice to them.

Postcolonial ecocriticism

In examining the environmental politics of isiXhosa literature, I draw on several theoretical frameworks. My literary analysis uses the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, a branch of environmental humanities that investigates “the many ways in which culture and the environment—the realm that both includes and exceeds the human—are interrelated and conceptualized” (Soper and Bradley 2013) while at the same time striving to narrow the ecological gap between colonizer and colonized (Huggan and Tiffin 2010). Drawing on African postcolonial scholarship (e.g., Mamdani 1996, Mbembe 2001, Mudimbe 1988,

Mamdani 2012), I emphasize the authority of Black South African voice and the agency and autonomy expressed through literary practice in South Africa and specifically Black conceptions of nature, environment, and environmentalism that incorporate human concerns of justice and equality. Building specifically on the work of Rob Nixon (2011) and Byron Caminero-Santangelo (2014), I consider the particular environmentalism of Black South Africans and the ways in which social and ecological understandings and concerns are tightly linked and expressed through poetic forms.

Postcolonial studies is concerned with the effects of modern colonialism on both colonized and colonizing peoples (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013). While colonialism is most obviously a geographical phenomenon involving the occupation, annexation and exploitation of physical territories and resources, postcolonial authors demonstrate that it is equally a political and cultural phenomenon created and maintained through a variety of discursive tactics (Young 2001, Gregory 2004). It is important to note the ways in which post-colonial studies acknowledges and grapples with the lasting effects of colonialism:

All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem. The development of new élites within independent societies, often buttressed by neo-colonial institutions; the development of internal divisions based on racial, linguistic or religious discriminations; the continuing unequal treatment of indigenous peoples in settler/invader societies—all of these testify to the fact that post-colonialism is a continuing process of resistances and reconstruction. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2006, 2)

The physical occupation and domination of colonized lands and peoples was—and continues to be—reliant upon political, cultural, and psychological processes, in both the occupied and occupying cultures, that justified and enabled the brutality and despotism of colonizing classes (Fanon 2001, Memmi 1967, Willems-Braun 1997). Thus, one of the central components of postcolonial studies is analysis of the role of literary culture in both asserting and resisting colonialism and in forming and reforming relationships between colonizers and the original inhabitants of any given region (Loomba 2005). Postcolonial studies recognizes the importance of literature and the arts in constructing or contesting political hegemonies and ideologies, encouraging critical thought, and voicing affirmation or resistance to governance and economic structures (Pratt 2008, Nixon 2011, Caminero-Santangelo 2014, Biko 2004, Attridge 2015, Harlow 1987, Biel 2000).

As European exploits through the nineteenth century transitioned from colonial conquest and occupation to economic and political domination (Young 2001), cultural media played increasingly important roles not only in the formation and maintenance of the subaltern, but also in shaping European imperialist attitudes and practices (Said 1994b). Literary works of imperial nations throughout the nineteenth century were notable for the nationalistic or moralistic sentiments they fostered in support of colonialism, their sense of European superiority and their general acceptance of the need to adopt colonial and imperial practices in order to sustain the European economy and way of life (Said 1994b, a). Within literary texts, various rhetorical strategies also justified the ongoing annexation of land and the export of European ideologies. Victorian travel writing played a key role in the colonizing process: if Victorian travellers hadn't written anything they would not be said to have discovered anything (Mudimbe 1988, Pratt 2008). Therefore the two processes—discovery and writing—were co-constitutive because “since the beginning of the nineteenth

century, explorers' reports had been useful for opening the African continent to European interests" (Mudimbe 1988, 20). Popular travel books

gave European reading publics a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world that were being explored, invaded, invested in, and colonized. They created a sense of curiosity, excitement, adventure and even moral fervour about European expansionism. (Pratt 2008, 3)

Crucially, "the explorer's text is not epistemologically inventive. It follows a path prescribed by a tradition" (Mudimbe 1988, 16). To maintain the colonial social order, the colonizer must discursively construct a portrait of the colonized. Nineteenth century writers focused on differences between Africa and Europe to emphasize the lack of similarity between the two continents as well as Africa's role as a progenitor to the more-evolved Europe (Mudimbe 1988, 107). From colonial times, Africa represented a "frozen state in the evolution of humankind" and colonial commentators "generally agreed that Blacks were inferior to Whites in moral fibre, cultural attainment and mental ability; the African was, to many eyes, the child in the family of man, modern man in embryo" (Mudimbe 1988, 107). Over time, this construction strengthened and deepened, indoctrinating Whites and Africans alike with these beliefs (Mudimbe 1988, 111, Fanon 2008).

Clearly, such ideas of racial hierarchy, superiority, and biological development were of particular relevance in South Africa. Colonial ideologies and, increasingly through the latter half of the nineteenth century and beyond, social Darwinism explained and rationalized the violent, racially-ordered social hierarchies that emerged in a colonial world. The systematic construction of the racial "other" as a lesser entity provides a necessary counterpoint against which the West defined itself. Clearly then, the construction of race and

the promotion of racism is not incidental to colonialism. Instead, racism is a vital and consubstantial component of colonial discourses and political economies that prevents the colonized from moving into the colonial class while helping the colonialist maintain their social position (Fanon 2008). In the hands of colonists, racism “came to represent one of the most lethal weapons to be used against the indigenous populations of the colonized territories of Africa and North America” (Fairweather 2006, 7).

In colonial and apartheid South Africa, not only did the ruling White minority face the constant threat of being overpowered by the Black and Coloured majority, but White industries also relied on an abundant supply of cheap labour provided by the non-White majority (e.g., Bourne 1903). With oppression of the majority vital to the economic and political success of the White ruling class, racism became a cultural and economic imperative; an inferior, subservient, poorly educated, and unskilled class of Blacks was actively constructed through both racist discourse and the careful application of segregationist policies that virtually guaranteed lifelong poverty for all but White people.

Despite the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity that has characterized South Africa throughout its history, South Africa relied on the construction of simplified groups that continue to define identity and politics in the country. Whiteness fused a diverse assemblage of European settlers with the bitterly divided Afrikaners and British despite their cultural and linguistic differences and the history of violent conflict between British and Afrikaners that reached a climax during the brutal South African War of 1899-1902. Non-White groups in South African include Blacks, Coloureds, and Indians, the latter two of which were further divided into sub-categories. Blacks include a diverse array of African peoples, ranging from the original San and Khoi groups to the various Bantu groups who have inhabited South Africa for some five hundred years to the migrants brought to South

Africa from neighbouring countries to labour in the gold mines of the Witwatersrand. Coloured people are a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking grouping defined by a mixed heritage that derives largely from intermarriages between Africans, Indians, Whites, and/or the diverse array of slave peoples brought to the Cape colony between 1653 and 1822. Finally, the tens of thousands of Indians brought to work in the sugar plantations surrounding the Natal colony centred in Durban form a fourth racial group. Indians ranked higher in South Africa's apartheid hierarchy than either Black or Coloured people and enjoyed various privileges that the other groups didn't thanks in large part to Mahatma Gandhi's political activism in the early twentieth century.

Along similar lines, the modernization paradigms that have been such a defining aspect of Western political culture over the past century and a half have continually positioned nations of the global South "behind" the West, claiming that they inhabited "a period that lay in the dim recesses of the history of the 'developed' world" (Gupta 1998, 10). In the contemporary era, these discursive constructs enable neo-colonial nations and peoples to perpetuate the myth that the Third World merely has to "catch up" with the West, "thereby denying that the poverty and underdevelopment of the many might be directly related to the current structures of inequality that result in growing wealth for the few" (Gupta 1998, 10). The discourse of developed/undeveloped nations is analogous to human development in which "underdevelopment" is associated with infancy and immaturity:

The temporal lag of postcoloniality is inscribed onto developing nations, anthropomorphized as less-than-fully-formed subjects, whose growth and maturity must be supervised by those who have reached adulthood—that is, the west. In this way, development discourse has

served to naturalize the control of the “underdeveloped” world by the west after the demise of formal colonial rule. (Gupta 1998, 11)

Linked to these modernization paradigms are ideas about language. In colonial and postcolonial societies alike, language itself also becomes a means of drawing intellectual boundaries and determining zones of inclusion and exclusion (Fanon 2008). Vernacular languages have no role in the civic life of colonial and even postcolonial societies, which are almost always run in the colonial language (Memmi 1967). Thus, the colonial European language “represents at once the means of achieving whiteness and rejecting blackness and, for white people, a subtle means of keeping black people in their place” (Fanon 2008, 22). In South Africa as elsewhere, the overriding use of English excludes much of the populace from the mainstream culture and politics of the country because, lacking adequate proficiency in the language, people are unable to take part in either its cultural production or cultural consumption through regular channels and are prevented from playing an active and engaged role in civic life—a form exclusion compounded by economic and geographic barriers as I discuss in Chapter 6 (Ngugi 1986, Memmi 1967). Colonial languages therefore represent a spiritual and psychological imperialism as well as a physical one that destroys people’s faith in the validity and importance of their own words for things, in their emotions and emotional connections, in their histories, stories, and the struggles of their past (Ngugi 1986).

Given the extent to which the social order is shaped and structured by discursive practices, it is clear that similar processes shape human relationships with landscapes and environments as well. “Questions about preservation of the natural environment are not just technical questions; they are also about what defines the good and moral life, and about the essence and meaning of our existence. [...] These are fundamental questions of defining

what our human community is and how it should exist” (qtd. in Clark 2011, 1). Thus, ecocriticism is concerned with philosophical questions that are also inevitably political, and increasingly criticizes traditional Western forms of nature, wilderness, and environmental writing for reinforcing thinking and ideologies that are broadly aligned with Western paradigms based on capitalism and colonialism, patriarchy, expansionism, private property, individualism and consumption (Buell 2005, Garrard 2012). Over the past two decades, ecocriticism has become increasingly sophisticated in its critique of ways in which notions of “nature” and “environment” have been used to support or advance various political arguments, remarking on the troubling associations of these ideas with colonialism and the erasure of first peoples from the “natural” landscape they describe as well as ways in which the terminology of ecological science has been repeatedly appropriated for political ends (Garrard 2012, Heise 2006). From relatively narrow definitions and ideas, ecocritical conceptions of the environment and human/environment relationships have expanded to include situations of alienation, dislocation, deracination, and oppression in all its forms (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, Heise 2006). As these emphases have shifted, ecocriticism has increasingly incorporated environmental justice perspectives that embrace issues of class, race and gender and the concern that the positive and negative effects of exposure to globalization and capitalism, environmental and technological hazards are unevenly distributed both at national and international levels (Heise 2008, 2013).

In this dissertation, I depart from the Western tradition of environmentalism with its dubious associations with imperialism, private property ownership and affirmation of White middle class privilege and anxieties (Clark 2011, Ray 2013). Instead, I embrace an expanded sense of environmentalism and environmental writing equally concerned with social justice, the place of humans on the landscape, and the ways in which the global imposition of

colonialism and capitalism have wrought disastrous damage on human communities and natural environments alike (Heise 2008). I consider literature, writing, and reading as important forms of political engagement and activism, and emphasize the value and importance of works in Indigenous languages. In particular, I apply postcolonial ecocritical theory to the case of South Africa and its history of institutionalized racism, segregation, and violence, examining the ways in which cultural and discursive practices have shaped the country's history.

Processes of reconciliation and decolonization are ongoing in South Africa, yet in an era of global postcolonialism the landscape and culture of the country remain starkly colonial: not only do vast tracts of land remain under the exclusive control of White landowners, but South African society also remains defined by conditions of economic apartheid. The majority of people in the country live in conditions of relative or absolute deprivation and grapple with the lasting effects of displacement and imposed colonial cultures (e.g., Gibson 2012, Desai 2002). As described above, literature has the power to illuminate alternatives and inspire alternative modes of thinking, yet at the same time it can serve to occlude them. This is obviously the case in South Africa, where mainstream literature does not reflect the diversity of the country, instead remaining dominated by English and, to a lesser extent, Afrikaans, and oriented towards contemporary, westernized society. To appreciate the ways in which texts are complicit in political projects including colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberal capitalism, postcolonial scholars have urged attentive readings that seek out often-overlooked political and social realities hidden in the text. For example, “contrapuntal reading”

means reading a text with an understanding of what is involved when
an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen

as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England... In reading a text, one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. (Said 1994b, 66-7)

While such readings of mainstream texts can serve to illuminate the cultural and ideological workings of empire, the present study is specifically concerned with dissident artists and the ability of writer-activists

to discern what is occluded, silenced, marginalized by prevailing ways of thinking and feeling, where it's possible to find tensions and fault lines in what is treated as merely given, and at what cost the apparent coherence and stability of the cultural fabric, and the social, economic and political system out of which it arises, are maintained. (Attridge 2015)

Just as colonial literature reinforced a worldview that advanced its agenda, so has the literature of emancipation, enlightenment, and agency contributed to the quest for independence. Increasingly, the vast body of intellectual and cultural work from beyond the West has become a form of resistance against the West's cultural and political hegemony (Young 2001, Said 1994b). Even as they developed into a singular contributor to notions of western supremacy, power, and dominance, poetry, novels, and essays also became vehicles through which colonized peoples could assert their own identities and histories. Building on this premise, I examine how the literary engagement with poverty, labour, oppression, and other occluded aspects of late capitalism can help make intelligible the tensions, contradictions and injustices of the global economic system, arguing that by listening to these voices we can begin to slow or reverse some of these damaging processes.

The present study is not the first to consider South African literature through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, yet it is notable that ecocritical scholarship in South Africa has focused overwhelmingly on White authors, with the major exceptions being Zakes Mda, who has lived outside of South Africa (mainly in Ohio) since the mid-1960s, and Bessie Head, who also wrote in English and whose work is also widely available internationally. Anthony Vital, whose postcolonial ecocritical writings include ecocriticism of works by J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and Zakes Mda, states,

there is no good reason not to develop an African ecocriticism, one which engages in debating what a society's assigning of significance to nature (in varieties of cultural products) reveals about both its present and past. Such debate, by opening to the ways modernity in African contexts transforms human relations with nature and, as a result, the impact of societies on natural environments, would join the struggle to enable social worlds find more equitable, sustainable, and healthy ways of inhabiting their place—as well as strengthen historical self-understanding. (Vital 2008b)

These are all noble aims, however a survey of Vital's work would seem to suggest that this “African ecocriticism” and “historical self-understanding” can be achieved by engaging almost exclusively through the work of White authors (Vital 2008b, 2005, 2008a, 2011, 2010)—again, with the sole exception being expatriate Zakes Mda.

Other South African ecocritical scholars have stayed more or less in the same vein; while Byron Caminero-Santangelo's important work on African ecocriticism includes a range of African writers from throughout the continent, his chapter on South Africa is limited to familiar classics (again, half White and half expatriate): Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*,

Bessie Head's *Where Rainclouds Gather*, Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, and Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* and *Get a Life*. Dan Wylie has written extensively on the ecopoetics of South African poets (Sydney Clouts (Wylie 2009, 2007a), Harold Farmer (Wylie 2007b), Douglas Livingston (Wylie 1994, Everitt and Wylie 2007), Brian Walter (Wylie 2013), and Thomas Pringle (Wylie 2003), yet with the notable exception of his book on King Shaka, his work is restricted to a fairly narrow spectrum of authors. Scott Slovic's "Booklist of International Environmental Literature" (2009) lists five examples of South African environmental literature, by Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, Alan Paton, and Zakes Mda. The only example of vernacular South African environmental literature offered is *The Bleek-Lloyd Collection of /Xam testimonies*, collected by linguists Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd between 1870 and 1884. While this collection is no doubt an exceptional example of Indigenous environmental literature, its inclusion here as the only example of African language literature would seem to suggest that vernacular literature, and the culture that produced it, is an artifact of the past. It is noteworthy that all of these lists are dated; examples of contemporary literature that illustrate the vibrant, dynamic nature of African environmentalism in all its cultural complexity and hybridity are conspicuously absent.

A recent essay collection, *Natures of Africa: Ecocriticism and Animal Studies in Contemporary Cultural Forms* (Moola 2016), begins to address these gaps. Extending the work of previous ecocritical work centred on internationally prominent authors and White concerns (e.g., Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 2011), Moola's collection focuses more specifically on African-language questions and Black writers. It also includes an essay in which Vital turns his attention to the Sowetan novelist K. Sello Duiker, which perhaps signals a growing awareness within ecocritical scholarship of the need to look beyond White, apartheid-era authors when it comes to South African environmental literature.

It is worth acknowledging that the political climate in South Africa poses particular challenges for ecocritical scholars; despite the evident need for a decolonized ecocritical scholarship, the path towards such a scholarship is not always simple or clear. In particular, there appears to be a legitimate and understandable reticence on the part of White scholars to venture into the politically fraught terrain of writing and speaking about languages and literatures that are not their own. For instance, in a review of Jeff Opland's compiled and translated edition *The Nation's Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho* (Mgqwetho 2007), Nomathamsanqa Tisani's snippy comment, "The special contribution [Opland] makes is bringing literary works written in isiXhosa into academia and thus, in a way, challenges the comfort zone of those who specialise in South African studies but make no effort to learn the indigenous languages" (Tisani 2008) hints at the impatience of Black scholars when it comes to language politics in the academy. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many White South African scholars may be caught in a catch-22 when it comes to language and culture: ashamed of their country's past and of the apartheid-era education that so inadequately prepared them for the linguistic and political realities of contemporary South Africa, they may resist exposing themselves to censure—or, worse, accusations of imperialist appropriations of African creations for their own scholarly gain—by wading into discussions on literature by authors of different cultural and racial backgrounds. While on one hand this reticence signals an awareness of and respect for the complexity of the political and cultural contexts from which African literature arises, on the other it actively contributes to the ongoing and problematic underrepresentation of important but lesser-known Black writers from ecocritical scholarship.

Poetic resistance

Poetry is a linguistic art common to all cultures and is particularly well-developed in oral cultures such as those of sub-Saharan Africa (Finnegan 1976). Unlike narrative literary forms, many poetic genres are unconstrained by the need to relate a linear narrative and are instead free to express feeling through novel arrangements of words and ideas. This freedom encourages non-linear, non-narrative modes of thought that in turn enable a departure from Western literary norms and their linkages with ideologies of progress and with teleological or moralistic thinking. While the linearity of narrative suggests a logical procession towards a particular end, the end, or ends, of much poetry is open and ambiguous, as is its meaning. This is particularly true of izibongo; as a spontaneously performed genre, izibongo are entirely subject to the inspiration of a moment or situation.

Like other forms of narrative or expository prose, much postmodern social critique embodies and reproduces the very language and technology it purports to contest rather than providing radical alternatives to neoliberal capitalism (Amin 1997, Hardt and Negri 2000, Zwicky 2015). Meanwhile, in the Western literary tradition, poetry has become marginal even as it has become increasingly preoccupied with the personal, the particular and the introspective since the Enlightenment period (Eagleton 2007). This contrasts with other societies, where poetry has remained a public and performative genre with political and philosophical importance (Furniss and Gunner 1995). Political poetry is often disparaged by critics in Western society, as though poetry displaying an overt politics or engagement with political issues were necessarily time bound and conceptually shallow. Yet far from being a truth about poetry, this view of the relationship between poetry and politics is particular to contemporary Western society. Across cultures and time periods, poetry has generally been a relevant component of public and political life.

In South Africa, the imbongi remains a respected political and intellectual figure whose public performances recount national histories while probing the nature of the human condition and the conundrums of contemporary politics (Kaschula 2004, Opland 2005). The role of poetry in Indigenous life in contemporary South Africa illustrates possibilities for contemporary Western society that, by and large, does not value the ability to think poetically or metaphorically. Rather than ornamental indulgences, metaphor and poetic speech are forms of thought and perception that encourage us to “see, simultaneously, similarities and dissimilarities: we experience things as both metaphysically distinct and ontologically connected” (Zwicky 2015, 10).

What may or may not be obvious is that poetry has never fully disengaged itself from its associations with shamanism; the poet, like the shaman, has mastered certain techniques—rhythmic, performative, imagistic, metaphoric—that summon the unconscious part of the mind, so that, in this dreamlike state between waking and sleeping, we may discover more about our thoughts and feelings than we would otherwise be able to do. (Corn 1997, 10)

Western society’s failure to appreciate the value of poetic forms of thinking and perception limits our capacity to conceive of solutions or alternatives to contemporary challenges as we remain trapped in rational modes of thought and understandings of the world. In grounding my investigation of these concerns in lyric philosophy and poetics, I take up a linguistic mode that by its very nature resists the reductionist discourse of Western neoliberalism and its Enlightenment-era roots. Instead, poetry takes an expansive view of humanity and the richness of its emotional, imaginative, and empathetic potential, offering a lyric ethics that enables the perception of matter in ways beyond what our linguistic systems permit

(Dickinson 2005). Poetic language reflects an ethics of inclusivity, an ecological ethics, with its very structure: “the dynamic of metaphoricity, its hinge, the articulatory dynamic that integrates its components and yet upholds their distinctness is an ecology precisely because of its capacity to preserve difference in community, to preserve the particularities of things in their larger contextual relationships” (Dickinson 2005, 4). Metaphor acts as “the hinge between language-dependant thinking and non-linguistic apprehensions of the world” and thus a lyric way of seeing and knowing accepts that resonance, clarity, and coherence exist independently of language, which can merely gesture towards this meaning (Dickinson 2005, 4). Working with the limited instrument of language, metaphor can produce a form of understanding in which we are able to perceive relationships between seemingly distinct subjects through their juxtaposition, a process in which we “see, simultaneously, similarities and dissimilarities: we experience things as both metaphysically distinct and ontologically connected” (Zwicky 2013).

Literature from beyond Western languages and cultural frameworks provide access to differing views of land and place, offering an important alternative to colonial versions of private property ownership and a Western framework that constructs lands, waters, ecosystems and even humans and their communities as “resources” and sources of “capital” to facilitate economic growth (Elsey 2013). Poetry “retains the capacity to shake up the divisive mindset that is endemic in our class-inflected and still-colonized world. [...] It can do this by holding different realities side by side: by juxtaposing the received mainstream perception of colonial reality with a perception that is rooted in Aboriginal experience” (Cariou 2014, 33). Through formal innovation and the emotive force of language itself, poetry “punctures holes in the expectations and understandings of contemporary life,” disrupting habitual modes of seeing and thinking and opening fertile conceptual ground in

which radical imagining can occur (McLeod 2014). It offers to provide us with “the tools to see past the boundaries that colonization has put in place. It can do this by reinvigorating the English language with Indigenous concepts, rhythms, accents, and forms” (Cariou 2014, 35).

In South Africa’s transforming extractive economy that has taken shape since British colonial times, ideas and culture may be rooted in the prevailing political and technological superstructure and social relations of production, yet the texts in question also have significant political implications. At the same time, external political, social, and technological forces impose themselves on poetic expression in forms such as censorship, tactics of terrorism, and the changing nature of performance and orality. As isiXhosa poetry has increasingly become a print or commercial performance medium subject to the cultural politics of reproduction, marketing, and commodification, its removal from Indigenous cultural and performative contexts alters it: “The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics” (Benjamin 2005, IV).

Methods

Between 2014 and 2016 I spent a total of a year in South Africa. While I was principally based in Grahamstown, in the Eastern Cape province, I also spent a month in Cape Town, two months in the former Transkei, and travelled to Durban and more widely throughout Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Johannesburg metropolitan area. These experiences gave me a broad perspective of the country and—particularly my time in the rural communities of the former Transkei—provided the opportunity to experience first-hand the culture, language, and environment from which izibongo arise. During my time in South Africa, I also conducted archival and literary research at the National English Literary Museum and the

Cory Library and took the opportunity to speak with experts in the various subfields of my study.

Through this work, I discovered several poets whose work is relevant to my discussion. Among them, I have specifically chosen to focus on Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, one of the foremost amaXhosa poets of the turbulent 1920s; Nise Malange and Alfred Themba Qabula, prominent poets of the Durban labour movement of the 1970s and 80s; and Thukela Poswayo, a contemporary poet of the former Transkei. I also touch on a long poem by David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi, whose extensive works are not explored in further detail in this dissertation because it has already been thoroughly discussed by other scholars (e.g., Opland 2002, 2004, 2005, 1987, Neser 2011, Bokoda 1994, Lenta 2006). There are many other relevant poets who could have been included in the present study. These include Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, William Wellington Gqoba, and John Solilo, whose extensive isiXhosa writings have recently been made available in English translation thanks to the tireless efforts of Jeff Opland, Pamela Maseko, Wandile Kuse, and Peter Tshobisa Mtuze. Other poets active in the apartheid resistance include Bongani Sitole, Durban poets Mafika Gwala and Gcina Mhlope, and Johannesburg performance artists Mzwakhe Mbuli and Lesogo Rampolokeng. I have chosen to focus on poets with obvious ties to the isiXhosa language and the amaXhosa landscape about whom relatively little has been written in recent years or whose work has not received scholarly attention at all, particularly from the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism.

In this study, I have also chosen to focus on poetry that is either directly part of the imbongi tradition or closely connected to it. However, it should be noted that this form is only one component within a vibrant and dynamic culture of oral literature in South Africa. In contemporary South Africa, particularly in its larger urban centres, spoken word and slam

poetry scenes are increasingly providing a platform for the expression of counter-cultural political, feminist, and environmentalist views explored here. With the rapid urbanization of South Africa and the African continent overall, such urban literatures—together with hip hop, rap, punk and hybrid music forms—are an increasingly important forum for examining and engaging with the politics of built environments and the myriad cultures that live in close proximity within them. Emerging voices such as Afurakan, Lebogang Mashile, Siyabonga Njica and Sechaba Nkitseng are bringing South African politics and spoken word poetry together in the townships and campuses of Cape Town and Johannesburg. Iimbongi performing in more traditional styles almost certainly play a role in this cultural milieu, however in this study I am unable to comment in depth on the nature of the contemporary urban literary scene in South Africa's large urban centres and the iimbongi's place within it. Faced with the need to limit the scope of the present work, I have chosen to emphasize rural poets of the Eastern Cape Province. This focus stems from my own interest in marginalized rural societies that, in South Africa, tend to be seen as a backward, underdeveloped and tradition-bound realm devoid of literary culture. In my study of contemporary iimbongi, I have also included iimbongi practicing in smaller urban centres, though most were raised in rural areas and maintain strong ties with their home communities.

Given the concentration of scholars in urban areas, I am confident that others will continue to explore these themes in South Africa's metropolises. In any case, this dissertation has barely begun to scratch the surface of a literary tradition that is no doubt dynamic and thriving in rural, peri-urban and urban areas alike in both traditional and contemporary forms. Due to my limited language ability, I have been unable to access the breadth of material that would enable me to comment on current trends in the subject matter of isiXhosa poetry within or across regions or on the ways in which practicing artists may

influence each other and each other's work. Instead, this study is limited to a few samples of contemporary izibongo that I have been able to record and have transcribed and translated. There is clearly a vast potential for others to build on these efforts in the years ahead.

The present study is particularly novel in that it combines a postcolonial ecocritical analysis of literary work with a study of the contemporary sociocultural importance of the imbongi drawn from the perspectives of audience members. From late 2015 to early 2016, I conducted field research that involved interviewing fifty isiXhosa-speaking people living in rural and peri-urban communities of the Eastern Cape province about their views on iimbongi. I felt that these interviews were vital to the study for several reasons. First, I was interested examining whether the role and tradition of the imbongi had changed relative to descriptions offered by previous scholars. In particular, I was interested in scholarship on the imbongi's political role and wanted to investigate whether they continue to play this role in the very different political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. To do this, I felt that it was important to ask people whether performances by imbongi that they had witnessed touched on political themes or affected their point of view on political issues. Second, it had been suggested to me that urban hubs are now the principle sites of spoken word innovation and production while rural areas have stagnated; outside of urban and peri-urban areas, the tradition of the imbongi could be more or less dead. I was curious to discover whether this was true, whether the tradition holds political importance in rural society, and, if so, how it might interact with rural development issues and other social concerns. Finally, I wanted to ascertain whether iimbongi are important or relevant to contemporary amaXhosa society in rural and peri-urban areas. In answering these questions, it seemed to me that relying on the testimonies of iimbongi alone would be inadvisable since they would clearly be biased and potentially unreliable commentators. Ultimately, the interviews with audience members were

invaluable in corroborating the descriptions of the tradition of the imbongi and the izibongo genre that iimbongi offered, and provided a more balanced and nuanced perspective of the contemporary importance of these poets.

Twenty-five participants lived in the rural areas surrounding the town of Willowvale in the Mbashe Municipality, another twenty-five lived in the township communities adjoining the small city of Grahamstown. Participants within each subset were chosen haphazardly to reflect the demographics of the respective community, with each subset including, insofar as possible, a balanced blend of ages, genders, and professions. In Willowvale, I hired a local research assistant—a twenty-six-year-old woman who had graduated from an arts program in East London—with extensive past experience working with research teams conducting questionnaire-based surveys. In Grahamstown, I hired a man in his forties who works as a research assistant and logistician at Rhodes University’s Department of Environmental Sciences on a part-time basis. It is worth noting that, given the close-knit nature of the villages we worked in and the safety and security concerns described below, many of the Willowvale respondents were known to my research assistant, which may have affected responses to some degree. Similarly, the differing gender, age and socioeconomic class of my research assistants may have had some bearing on the fact that participant responses varied markedly between the rural and township sites.

Both research assistants were mother-tongue isiXhosa-speakers fully bilingual in English and, as local residents of the research sites, had a thorough knowledge of local cultural norms and suitable interview protocol. These interviews were mainly conducted in isiXhosa and involved the translation of English questions into isiXhosa by the research assistant followed by a translation into English of the participant’s response. This method allowed for a fluid, semi-structured interview format that enabled me to follow up on

particular points or ask a participant to clarify or explain a response in greater detail. I recorded all interviews and transcribed the English portion. However, where participants are quoted in English throughout the text, this is almost always a verbatim transcription of a response by a participant who chose to conduct the interview in English without the assistance of a translator; the interviews conducted with the help of a translator were used for supplementary information rather than direct quotations. While providing translated transcriptions of the isiXhosa portion of the interviews may have more accurately captured the content of participant responses (particularly in cases where the research assistant was compelled to summarize lengthy responses) this method was not possible simply in that it was cost-prohibitive given the limited research funds available. In keeping with the themes of agency, language and voice that form the core of this dissertation, I have chosen not to edit participant quotations for grammar or clarity. There are many versions of English; while the English spoken by the research participants may be unfamiliar to North American readers in its structure and cadence, I feel that it would be inappropriate to alter it simply to make it conform to Western notions of grammatical clarity.

During the same research period, I also interviewed fourteen practicing iimbongi living in the communities of Mthatha, Willowvale, East London (Gompo township and Orange Grove informal settlement), King Williamstown (Zwelitsha township), Grahamstown (Joza township), and Durban. Past scholars have taken the approach of working closely with practicing iimbongi, discussing the tradition alongside the work of a particular poet (for example, Jeff Opland has written at length about his personal relationship with David Yali-Manisi). Yet, with the exception of Zolani Mkiva, no scholars had previously written about the poets I spoke with, nor had any previous scholarship that I came across brought together a range of viewpoints on the art and tradition of the iimbongi

with particular emphasis on its changing spiritual and cultural significance. The interviews were generally carried out in isiXhosa with the assistance of experienced, mother-tongue interpreters, although a portion of participants preferred to speak English. Between 2014 and 2016, I was also able to attend several official functions at which iimbongi performed where I recorded poems that I subsequently had transcribed and translated. The translator that I hired for this work, Dumisa Mpupha, is himself an iimbongi and provided helpful insights on the language, metaphors, and cultural context of the poems.

I chose Willowvale as a rural field research site for several reasons. Situated in the former Transkei Bantustan centres, it lies within the amaXhosa “homeland.” Rather than a landscape dominated by privately-owned farmland and town sites surrounded by Black townships, the Transkei is largely rural and its status as a former homeland has resulted in visibly different settlement patterns than other parts of South Africa. Communities are largely agrarian villages, with modest homesteads dotting the open landscape around small commercial centres. For generations, the Transkei region was used as a source of cheap labour sustained by the subsistence work of women, children, and the elderly (Fairweather 2006); South Africa’s gold and diamond mines remain an important income source for these communities while migration remains a prominent feature of life in the region. At the same time, the Transkei also boasts a rich cultural heritage with vibrant traditions of oral poetry, colonial resistance and cultural adaptation to profound change (Biko 2004, Opland 1975, 1998). Willowvale is located near the southern end of the Transkei, and its relative proximity to Grahamstown and past involvement with university research projects makes it a research location that is relatively easy to access, affordable, convenient, and safe. The community also lies within the Mbashe municipality, which is home to Zwelonke, King of the amaXhosa

nation and to the prominent imbongi Zolani Mkiva, both of whom I was able to interview over the course of my fieldwork.

Figure 1. Landscape of the Willowvale area



In conducting research in Willowvale, I relied largely on my research assistant's intimate knowledge of the area. Due to personal safety and security concerns (which stemmed not only from my knowledge of previous near-fatal attacks on researchers working in the broader Transkei area but also from the several rapes, stabbings, and murders in the villages around Willowvale during my stay in the area), we limited our field visits to households that were known to my research assistant, either through her past research work in the area or her personal connections, and interviewed one person in each household. Because we visited households during the day between Monday and Friday and were therefore more likely to find people who were not formally employed, we supplemented these household visits with interviews with professionals working at offices that we visited in

town. No attempt was made to capture a random selection of participants; rather, I purposefully aimed to speak to a range of people whose genders, ages, and professions roughly reflected the community as a whole. In Grahamstown, I also conducted interviews during regular working hours as well as on a Saturday in order to capture people both in and out of formal employment. Here security was much less of a concern, and with the houses close together we were able to go door to door, choosing houses at random but again actively seeking participants who reflected the diversity of gender, ages, and professions present in the community.

Figure 2. Joza township, Grahamstown



Conclusion

In twenty-first century South Africa, not only does the physical landscape reflect the country's segregationist history, so too does its cultural landscape. Literature and literary criticism remains largely by, for, and about White people, whether English or Afrikaner.

Where literary criticism and analysis does engage with vernacular African literature, it generally deploys literary theories and analytical frameworks developed in the West (Nxasana 2016). While the present study is no exception in its use of postcolonial ecocritical and Marxist frameworks, I have attempted to overcome several key pitfalls of Western-centred theory in my methodologies. In particular, through months of immersive fieldwork, as well as through interviews with practicing iimbongi and their audiences, I discovered important aspects of the izibongo genre and the imbongi tradition that largely have been overlooked in scholarship to date. Importantly, my research reveals “evolving power dynamics in African societies,” and “the role of the ‘sacred’ or spirituality which often forms and informs the dynamics of the text” (Nxasana 2016). As I discuss in the chapters that follow, my research findings show that not only have many aspects of amaXhosa society persisted from pre-colonial times to the present, but also that there is a widely-felt hunger for greater connections to the stories, histories, and cultural practices that shape the contemporary identity of amaXhosa people.

Chapter 3: Verse, violence, and the migrant labour system

Introduction

The emergence of capitalism in South Africa is linked to the development of the South African state and to the rise of new relationships of exploitation and unequal power among the South African people. These shifts set the stage for the escalating social and political upheaval that continues to define South Africa into the present (Hart 2002, Brown 2015). Social and environmental changes were forcibly imposed on the amaXhosa people in the interest of capitalist expansion by converting an independent peasantry to a proletariat divorced from the means of production and reliant on an imposed economic order. In South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, this process was violent and coercive and involved wrenching entire populations from their ancestral lands and land-based livelihoods. It was therefore a process with profound ecological consequences for those affected and for the environments they inhabited—both in the present and for generations to come.

The 1920s in particular was a period of upheaval and change that brought with it worker strikes, deepening segregation and a shifting balance between Black workers, White workers and White mine owners. By 1920, there were over 200,000 Black mineworkers living on the Witwatersrand with an additional 100,000 employed elsewhere (Beinart 2001). The Rand Revolt broke out in 1922 after years of escalating tensions that accompanied the labour shifts and economic depression following World War One. The changes had seen mining costs rise while the price of gold was fixed under the gold standard, leading to mounting dissatisfaction among workers, particularly Whites, who saw their employment become increasingly precarious as they were passed over or undermined in favour of cheaper Black labourers.

Alongside major social and political developments unfolding in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, changes in the literary landscape altered the terms and methods of intellectual engagement and debate (Remington 2013, Jordan 1973). In particular, isiXhosa literature was increasingly appearing in print, most notably in newspapers and other serial publications that had become a staple of the South African literary landscape since their first appearance in 1837 (Opland 1998, 1983). Over the course of the nineteenth century, these publications had grown into a major forum for intellectual and literary exchange. As Jeff Opland describes, “in nineteenth-century newspapers Xhosa literature took its first hesitant steps into print, confronted the dominance of European models and editorial control, and grew to maturity [...] Furthermore, this literature in newspapers often drew upon oral modes of expression” (Opland 1998, 223). As well as reflecting the social and political concerns of the times, isiXhosa writings through this period reflect changing notions of dwelling and habitation, shifting ideas of gender, family, and community, and abiding notions of homeland and ancestral heritage (Mqhayi 2009, Gqoba 2015, Mgqwetho 2007, Solilo 2016). Overall, they expressed relationships with landscapes and the non-human environment along with the many ways in which broader sociopolitical change was bringing rapid change to longstanding relationships between amaXhosa people and their environments.

The works of Nontsizi Mgqwetho, “the first and only female poet to produce a substantial body of work in Xhosa,” are a prime example of such writing (Opland 2007, xiv). Mgqwetho, a poet from the rural Ciskei who made her home in Johannesburg during the decade that she wrote and published her poems, is one of South Africa’s greatest literary figures yet very little is known about her life. Published regularly in the Johannesburg newspaper *Umteteli waBantu* from 1920 to 1929, Mgqwetho’s poems confront the issues of a

period defined by the precipitous rise of extractive capitalism and urbanization, including “male dominance, ineffective leadership, black apathy, white malice and indifference, economic exploitation, and a tragic history of nineteenth-century territorial and cultural dispossession” (Opland 2007). Written for vernacular language newspapers, Mqgqweho’s poems are explicitly directed toward an isiXhosa readership, rather than writing back to the “centre” as global literature is so often assumed to do (Nxasana 2016, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002).

Yet even as she denounces the social ills wrought by the upheavals of her time, Mqgqweho acknowledges the complexity of the circumstances, in which these very changes brought new freedoms and reordered social structures, opened new spaces and channels of communication, debate and literary production, and enabled a freedom of speech and creativity that would not have been possible a generation earlier. Thus, her engagement with the tumultuous social and political changes of her times is astute and nuanced: she rails against injustices imposed by Whites yet also points to the various failures of Blacks, including complicit silence, rampant jealousy and a lack of unity resulting from internecine strife (Mqgqweho 2007).

While her poetry does not always reflect environmental relationships in an overt style that is recognizable as environmental or “nature” writing for a Western reader, it nevertheless encapsulates environmental sensibilities, environmental justice concerns and changing human relationships with the environment in a broad sense. In engaging with the politics and social upheaval of her time, Mqgqweho reveals a complex version of environmentalism that is less concerned with pastoral aesthetics or descriptions of the specific entities of the natural landscape than it is with the overarching structural conditions and relationships leading to the chronic degradation of people and their environments.

Byron Caminero-Santangelo (2014) sees such conceptions of nature and environment as part of an African version of environmentalism that has developed from the centuries of plunder that have characterized the colonial experience on the African continent. Unlike Western forms of environmentalism that are more obviously concerned with “truths of ecology” and the “appreciation and care for nature,” African environmentalism is more evidently linked to “economic inequality, social justice, and political rights [...] of the impoverished and disenfranchised” (Caminero-Santangelo 2014). Through the lens of political ecology,

texts that do not prioritize the observation of nature or that only reference environmental change fleetingly or indirectly but that point to the relationship between anticolonial struggle and the fight against environmentally destructive legacies of colonialism can still be considered environmental and can be more important rhetorically in the struggle against ecologically destructive processes than forms of nature and environmentalist writing that suppress histories of empire.

(Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 7-8)

This chapter discusses the work of Nontsizi Mggqwetho within the context of the conditions and events of the historical period in which she lived, showing how the social upheaval and resistance of her times permitted her, as a rural woman from an oral culture, to voice her politics well beyond her community through print media. I present the colonial and capitalist policies that enabled the development of extractive capitalism in South Africa, beginning with the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in 1896 and the deepening segregationist politics that culminated in the establishment of apartheid in 1948. In this historical analysis, I pay particular attention to the development of the migrant labour system that enabled the development and profitability of South Africa’s gold industry as well as the

rise of union politics in the opening years of the 1920s. At that point in history, gold was central to the world's trading system, then dominated by the financial and mercantile institutions of the City of London. As world trade grew in the second half of the nineteenth century, so the amount of gold required to underpin it increased enormously. The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, which became the world's largest producer in little more than a decade, was a tremendous fillip to international trade. This was particularly so because, at much the same time, production in other major gold fields was declining. (Trapido 2011, 89)

Mgqwetho's poetry is intimately tied to the gold industry and my analysis plays close attention to the political and economic factors that enabled its rise. In particular, I consider the ways in which the emerging South African state actively created a proletariat through divisive and violent means that set the stage for the apartheid order that would follow. The process at work in South Africa mirrored a larger global order being established through the expansion of capitalist colonialism to support the markets and industrial sectors of the Global North in general and Britain in particular (Lloyd 2001). While diamonds were a significant industry in South Africa from 1867 onwards and played an important role in the initial development of extractive capitalism and the migrant labour system in the emerging state of South Africa, this chapter focuses on the gold that became South Africa's primary export soon after its discovery in 1886 and retained this position of prominence throughout the century that followed (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991, Jeeves 1985a, Allen 1992, Wilson 1972). The environmentally devastating industry not only fundamentally changed the local environments of the Witwatersrand (Rösner and Schalkwyk 2000, Weissenstein and Sinkala 2011), but also, by contributing to such drastic changes to human communities

throughout Southern Africa and their relationship to land and non-human nature, profoundly altered natural environments throughout the entire region. I look at the ways in which segregation facilitated economic development and the ways in which Black resistance was also a form of class struggle that simultaneously combatted racial, cultural, and economic oppression (Friedman 2015, 1987). In particular, I consider these responses in the context of capitalist geographies of uneven development and the institutionalization of extreme polarization under apartheid that exemplifies the racially-ordered capitalism on which Western prosperity is built (Amin 1997, Biel 2000, Smith 2008).

The chapter also explores some of the formal shifts that isiXhosa poetry experienced as it left the traditional realm and increasingly became a public form of political activism. Mqgqetho, like other poets of her time, adopted certain formal elements of Western poetry, such as regular stanzas and rhyme schemes, even as it maintained traditional imagery and metaphors. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as poetry shifted from being an exclusively oral art form to one that is also written and published, individual poets were able to reach wider and more ethnically diverse audiences than oral poets, who remained largely tied to place-specific venues and customary norms and perspectives. The rise of newspapers and print media permitted new freedoms in terms of both literary production and distribution, fostering critical thought and facilitating lively cultural and political debate. In particular, the newspaper medium opened new possibilities without which Nontsizi Mqgqetho, a rural woman, would have been unable to pursue a poetic practice (Nxasana 2016). I also look at the ways in which the politics and concerns that Mqgqetho expresses in her poetry reflect the ways in which individual experiences of South Africa's social transformations were highly mediated by gender. In this way, I consider the intersectionality of race and gender, looking at the impacts of colonialism, the imposition of capitalism, and

the resultant migrant labour system on women as expressed by one of the only female writers of the time. Finally, drawing on Byron Caminero-Santangelo's descriptions of African environmentalists, I discuss the ways in which Mqgqwetho's writing is a particularly African version of environmental activism, showing how her work directly contests the colonial and apartheid policies that enabled the exploitation of Black South Africans and their environments and actively produced situations of underdevelopment and environmental degradation throughout the country (Caminero-Santangelo 2014).

Historical and social perspectives

In 1795, the seizure of the Dutch Cape colony by British forces began a century of British domination of South Africa (Trapido 2011, 66). Over this period, the South African landscape increasingly became reordered in the service of extractive capitalism, first through the conversion of vast tracts of land to privately-owned farms, then through the establishment and rapid expansion of the gold and diamond industries (Beinart, Delius, and Trapido 1986, Yudelman 1983). "Out of these latter discoveries came a powerful and confident mining capitalism embedded in South Africa but linked to the world's major financial centre, which was the City of London" (Trapido 2011). The early expansion of capitalist industries was a boon to the South African peasantry, which initially enjoyed better sales and better prices as a result of increased demand for the agricultural products (Beinart, Delius, and Trapido 1986). However, with the discovery of Kimberly diamonds in 1867 and particularly after the discovery of Witwatersrand gold in 1886, the dominant classes soon colluded "to undermine this peasantry primarily in order to bolster labour supplies. Mine-owners, White farmers, and colonial governments denied Black producers access to land and markets while increasing labour and tax demands. This alliance spelled doom for the

peasantry, and the twentieth century witnessed the deepening immiseration of African communities in the reserves and on the farms” (Beinart, Delius, and Trapido 1986). The scenario was further complicated by the competing needs for cheap Black labour on the part of both agricultural and mineral capitalists and an increasingly complex relationship between the two sectors (Beinart, Delius, and Trapido 1986). Within this balance,

Farmers were always disadvantaged in that they could only afford, or were only prepared to pay, lower wages. They thus sought to immobilize their labour on the farms to avoid losing it to the mines. [...] [T]his imperative had important implications for farmers’ attitudes to segregation, the policy which was increasingly accepted as the basis for ordering the relationship between black and white in the early decades of the twentieth century. While farmers certainly supported some aspects of segregationist thinking they were not in favour of the extension or even entrenchment of the reserves which was central to many – particularly the mining houses’ – interpretations of the policy. On the one hand the protection of communal lands blocked the further expansion of white farming areas and impeded the dismemberment of African communities. On the other hand, the possibility of increased scope of African settlement in the reserves offered a potential bolt hole to farm tenants. Farmers feared that reserve residents would spurn employment in agriculture in favour of the higher wages offered by the mines. (Beinart, Delius, and Trapido 1986)

The emergence of increasingly stringent segregation, particularly through the establishment of reserves, reflects a situation in which the desires of agricultural capitalism were increasingly subsidiary to those of mineral extraction as mining capital grew into the sector of principle importance from the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 onward (Beinart, Delius, and Trapido 1986). Migrant labour became a central and perennial feature of the South African gold industry and remained a prominent feature of South African society throughout the twentieth century, setting a precedent and working model for other developing industries. Unlike other industrializing contexts, in which migrant labour was a short-term phenomenon that marked a shift between agrarian and industrial economies, “In South Africa the movement between rural and urban areas became entrenched at the center of the economic system and a permanent feature of life for millions of workers. Subcontinental labor migration was necessary to mine the gold that paid for (and was part of) the process of South African industrialization” (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991, xiii). With the end price of gold tightly controlled, the industry was forced to keep costs stable; without its successful suppression of labour costs, “the extraordinary levels of gold production achieved since 1886 would not have been possible” (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991, xiv).

By all accounts, the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in 1886 marked a watershed moment in South Africa’s history. Within ten years, geological surveys had determined that the deposit was the world’s largest, a vast reef of uniformly low-grade ore plunging forty miles underground (Apartheid Museum 2015). The low concentration of gold coupled with the depth and vast dispersion of the deposit and its distance from transportation centres made extraction both capital and labour intensive. With mining capitalists facing fixed capital costs and the need for large, long-term investments, cost

containment by minimizing the cost of labour became an imperative. By 1889, the industry had organized a Chamber of Mines that upheld the labour procurement enterprise (Beinart 2001), noting that “an abundant supply of cheap labour drawn from the coloured races is of supreme importance, and without this aid there do not appear to be any great potentialities for the shareholder, the white mine employé [sic], or the country at large” (Bourne 1903, 7).

The Chamber of Mines noted further that “the native of South Africa is an excellent and powerful muscular machine, and if he can be obtained in sufficient numbers and induced to remain on the mines for extended periods we do not desire to look further afield” (Bourne 1903, 7). That is, thanks to the subcontinent’s latent labour supply, indentured labour would not need to be imported from distant parts of the Empire. The Chamber went on to urge that “without delay everything that is possible shall be done by the Government in placing at their disposal all the ‘muscular machines’ procurable from the whole of British South Africa, and such more northern parts of the continent as are within reach” (Bourne 1903, 7). While a certain amount of cheap labour was available in relatively close proximity to the goldfields, it was insufficient to meet the needs of the mines. From 1920, the Chamber of Mines entered a phase of dramatic expansion that would last the next fifty years, recruiting upwards of 200,000 labourers annually from the northern colonies of Bechuanaland (now Botswana, Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Mozambique and as far away as Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi), where the tariffs on labour exports generated a welcome source of income for colonial governments (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991). As it spread into these northern areas, the industry exploited conditions of poverty and desperation, coercing labourers from their traditional economies and lifeways into a system in which they became the chief source of profit for shareholders and mine owners, largely in Britain, Europe and North America (Thompson 2000).

Such expansion could not have been undertaken by the mining industry alone. Despite the ostensibly numerous labourers, in the early days of the industry the latent labour pool consisted of autonomous and self-sufficient agrarians and pastoralists with little interest in the colonial cash economy. A burning question for the industry therefore became “how this vital factor in the general prosperity can be provided as the mining industry demands” (Bourne 1903, 7). With industrial growth and, by extension, the South African colonial government dependent on cheap labour, the process of removing labour from the landscape and sending it underground was of pressing concern. The Chamber of Mines duly urged that “legal and moral pressure” be enacted in order to compel these people into wage labour in greater numbers and for longer periods (Bourne 1903, 8). This pressure took the form of a stock sequence of colonial policies—taxes, dress codes, cultural prohibitions, religious exhortations, and confinement in land reserves—designed to erode self-sufficiency while manufacturing reliance on the cash economy in order to proletarianize an autonomous peasant population (Fairweather 2006, Mbeki 1964, Allen 1992). Gradually, “Under the pressures of colonial taxation, land dispossession, population increase, and ecological decay,” increasing numbers of workers were driven to seek work in colonial industries (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991).

The process of implementing these policies was already well underway across much of the subcontinent by the time the Chamber of Mines issued its exhortations. In the eastern Cape, the traditional lifeways of the amaXhosa had been violently disrupted by the arrival of European settlers from the late eighteenth century onward (Fairweather 2006). Over the course of nine frontier wars waged between the Afrikaner or British colonialists and the amaXhosa between 1779 and 1879, the border between the settlers and the amaXhosa territories moved inexorably further east. In December 1847, Sir Harry Smith arrived in Port

Elizabeth to serve as Governor of the Eastern Cape, for the first time exposing amaXhosa people to direct colonial rule (Peires 1989). On arrival, Governor Smith immediately expelled the amaXhosa from their traditional lands between the Fish and Keiskamma Rivers, “hitherto an integral part of Xhosaland,” and annexed it to the White settlers and amaMfengu of the Cape Colony (Peires 1989, 7). Less than three years later, the Eighth Frontier War, the War of Mlanjeni waged from 1850 to 1853, would become “the longest, hardest and ugliest war ever fought over one hundred years of bloodshed on the Cape Colony’s eastern frontier” (Peires 1989, 12).

By the end of this long and grievous war, decades of violence had sapped the strength and leadership of the amaXhosa nation, leaving it vulnerable to disaster. As commentators have noted, the conditions for the catastrophe had gradually been laid over the preceding decades such that “it was relatively easy, in a land where material well-being seemed impossible to attain, to convince people that their salvation would come through supernatural powers. This was seen through the influence of the prophecies of Nongqawuse” (Allen 1992). Indeed, Mlanjeni the Riverman, who urged the amaXhosa into the eponymous war, had already gained credence as a prophet in the years leading up to the Eight Frontier War through his dedication to such spiritual eccentricities as sitting “up to his neck in water for hours—some said days” and “subsisting only on ants’ eggs, water-grass and other foods of nature” (Peires 1989). Despite widespread acceptance of his prophetic abilities and his erroneous claims that “The guns of the British would shoot hot water, their bullets would do no harm, and their gunpowder would fail to ignite,” Mlanjeni’s broken promises and the credence of his followers hinted at the cataclysm to come (Peires 1989, 11).

Although she had been raised as his daughter, Nongqawuse was in fact a niece of Mhlakaza, a chief councillor of King Sarhili, son of the beloved King Hintsá who had been

killed and beheaded through the treachery of Sir Harry Smith in 1835 during the Sixth Frontier War. Importantly, “this Mhlakaza was not just a councillor, he served his people as a diviner, living at Gxarha where the Kei enters the sea” (Mqhayi 2009). Following in this lineage, Nongqawuse had a vision of two strange men who asked her to relay a message to her people that would restore the former strength and wellbeing of the amaXhosa people and help drive out the White settlers:

Tell them that the whole community will rise from the dead; and that cattle now living must be slaughtered, for they have been reared by contaminated hands, since there are people about who deal in witchcraft.

There should be no cultivation, but new grain pits must be dug, new houses must be built, and great strong cattle enclosures must be erected. Cut out new milksacks and weave many doors from buka roots. So says chief Napakade, the descendant of Sifuba-sibanzi. The people must leave their witchcraft, for soon they will be examined by diviners. (Peires 1989, 79)

Mhlakaza passed on the message to the amaXhosa people, who felt that the lungsickness that at the time was rapidly spreading among the cattle was proof that the beasts were indeed tainted. In response to these prophecies and the growing desperation of the period, thousands of amaXhosa killed their cattle over the course of a mass slaughter that lasted thirteen months, from April 1856 to May 1857, and resulted in the death of some 400,000 cattle (Peires 1987). The famine that followed brought disease, starvation and an exodus of amaXhosa people from their lands to the extent that the government census taken at the end of 1857 reported a drop in the population of British Kaffraria from 104,721 to

37,697 over the space of twelve months (Davies 2007). The catastrophe, horrific beyond imagining, brought an end to eighty years of amaXhosa resistance and dealt a death blow to the independence of the amaXhosa nation; in the years that followed, almost all of the remaining lands of emaXhoseni were “given away to white settlers or black clients of the Cape government” (Peires 1987).

Altogether, conflicts, various disasters, and dispossession under the capitalist expansion of the nineteenth century resulted in the upheaval and restructuring of Black and Afrikaner rural society and the emigration of landless peasants to urban centres; by 1904, some fifty-three percent of Whites and ten percent of Blacks lived in towns and urban areas (Apartheid Museum 2015). These demographic shifts were further escalated with the infamous 1913 Land Act that successfully established geographical segregation throughout the newly-minted Union of South Africa. The reserve system created under the Act set aside 7.3 percent of the land base as reserves for Blacks, prohibiting them from residing or owning land in non-designated areas (Marais 2001, 9). Despite the expansion of this total area to thirteen percent under the 1936 Native Land and Trust Act, the Acts were the most effective measure to date in promptly forcing thousands of Black South Africans off their traditional lands and into the labour market (Marais 2001, Fairweather 2006). Fairweather notes,

When a hut tax of ten shillings per annum was first levied in the Cape colony in the late nineteenth century, most Africans tried to come up with the money by selling their crops or their cattle rather than their labour. However, once their lands were taken, increasing numbers of them were forced to seek wage labour in the white owned mines, industries and farms. (Fairweather 2006, 60)

With only thirteen percent of the land base available for the country’s entire Black

population, the land acts prevented all but a handful of families from surviving as independent farmers while the remainder was driven to seek wage labour (Fairweather 2006). At the same time, to prevent an influx of dispossessed and impoverished Blacks into the cities, increasingly draconian pass laws prevented all but employed, pass-holding Blacks from relocating—even on a temporary basis—out of the reserves and into urban areas. The overcrowding in the reserves that resulted led to crises of poverty and malnutrition as the densely populated agricultural lands became increasingly eroded, overgrazed, and unproductive (Fairweather 2006, Mbeki 1964). With able-bodied men increasingly drawn into mining labour, the reserves came to serve as zones for the reproduction of labour and dumping grounds for those bodies (women, children, the infirm, and the elderly) deemed unnecessary by capitalist logic (Mbeki 1964). Together with the institutional limbo of urban worker compounds and hostels, reserves formed part of a network of spaces that isolated and controlled Black labour (Amin 1997, 58).

The annexation of land under the Land Act “established the social prerequisite of a single legal order in a colonial settler society: appropriation of land, destruction of communal autonomy, and establishment of the ‘freedom’ of the individual to become a wage worker” (Mamdani 1996, 220). In a matter of decades, reserves, relocations, and pass laws had effectively converted a large segment of the Black South African population to a migrant proletariat geographically separated from the White owners of the means of production through the use of violent force. This state-sponsored program of spatial reorganization aimed to “extend, expand, and intensify” the power of the state through a process of accumulation by dispossession that intensified “the uneven geographical conditions under which capital accumulation occurs” and exploited “the ‘asymmetries’ that inevitably arise out of spatial exchange relations” (Harvey 2003, 31). These asymmetries only grew more

pronounced as the twentieth century advanced. As in other contexts, an unequal distribution of benefits and increased economic polarization were inevitable outcomes of capital expansion and its associated processes of accumulation and dispossession (Biel 2000, Smith 2008).

These geographies of segregation effectively veiled the social and environmental consequences of economic growth, sequestering them in reserves and ascribing them to the inferior social and cultural conditions of the subjugated race; the era's increasingly pervasive rhetoric of "civilizing" Black South Africans through this process of urbanization and segmentation masked a concerted assault on their economic autonomy. Systematic attacks on Black cultural institutions that celebrated traditional livelihoods and environmental relationships were part of a larger process of weakening traditional economies, generating dependency, and coercing people into the labour market (Fairweather 2006).

While many factors contributed to the development of apartheid, the system had its roots firmly planted in the gold mining industry, where class structure, class interests, and racial discrimination linked to the specific constraints of gold production helped thoroughly embed segregationist policies and mindsets in the emerging nation of South Africa (Johnstone 1976).

By 1910, only twenty-four years after the first discoveries on the Witwatersrand, the mines had created a labour system which delivered more than 200,000 unskilled black workers annually to the Witwatersrand. [...] Most were completely without previous industrial experience. Recruited from throughout southern Africa, they left their pastoral and agricultural pursuits to work on unfamiliar tasks in a

regimented, totally alien and dangerous industrial environment. (Jeeves 1985b, 3)

By 1920, “mining companies had refined their low-wage system of oscillating migration and authoritarian control into a rigidly hierarchical racial division of labor” (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991, 4), resulting in the creation of “two parallel industrial working classes, one originally unskilled and drawn from the indigenous population, the other migrant and largely drawn from Britain and its settler empire” (Trapido 2011, 89). While there was no shortage of unskilled labour in southern Africa, skilled White workers often had to be enticed to the Rand by the promise of high salaries, and a practice that was initially a matter of supply and demand “gradually hardened into a rigid caste system” (Wilson 1972). From 1897, when White mineworkers first struck in response to an attempt by mine owners to lower their wages to the level earned by Blacks, through the first three decades of the twentieth century, tensions between the two racialized factions simmered. At the same time, in many respects the interests of the two were aligned. The strikes of 1907 and 1922 were racially motivated, spurred by White concerns over the threat to their employment posed by cheap Black labour (Allen 1992). Yet in other instances, where labour activism “was not offensive to blacks, as in the strike of 1913 when 14 555 white miners demanded trade union recognition,” Blacks “joined in and raised their own grievances” (Allen 1992, 269). When the 1913 mining strike was followed by a railway strike and threat of a general strike, “martial law was declared and 70 000 armed men were mobilised for action against the strikers” (Allen 1992, 273).

The First World War resulted in significant shifts in labour dynamics: as White workers enlisted, exiting the labour pool, labour became increasingly scarce and costly, yet the colour bar, which placed specific restrictions on Black labour, prevented White labour from being replaced with Black (Allen 1992). The years that followed brought “an

astronomical increase in the cost of living with prices rising by almost 50% between 1917 and 1920” (Wilson 1972). In response to increased pressures from mine owners, in July 1918, 15,000 Black mineworkers struck in support of wage demands, leading to violent clashes with police (Allen 1992). Meanwhile, other events were taking their toll. Environmental factors as well as economic factors contributed to widespread social stress that led to the rise of the racist politics that eventually coalesced into the apartheid system. By the early twentieth century, agricultural productivity had begun to decline in many areas as over-cropped soils became depleted, leading to hardship for Black and White farmers alike. In September 1918, South Africa was also hit by the influenza pandemic that swept around the globe:

As many as 52 489 mineworkers were admitted to mine hospitals with influenza during those two months out of a total labour force of 168 188. 1741 mineworkers died of it. The operation of the mines was seriously affected by the incidence of the disease. The supply of recruits from British South Africa almost dried up while recruitment from Mozambique had to be suspended. To make matters worse for the mineworkers, there was famine in the reserves. The influenza epidemic had disrupted work on the land. The previous year’s harvest had been ruined by rain. The one which followed was devastated by drought. (Allen 1992)

In the midst of these events, by September 1918, White mineworkers had succeeded in their bid to convince mine owners not to fill any position held by a White worker with a Black or Coloured worker. There were clear ideological motivations for appeasing White labour, as Alan Jeeves explains:

Mining industry correspondence indicates that most of the owners preferred a racially based society with the whites clearly on top. Some of them recognized a kind of social obligation to subsidize (in effect) the whites on the mines in order to preserve this kind of a society, but not if it would put at risk the long-term profitability of the mines. Even before the strike of 1907, one of the mining groups had concluded that the industry might have soon to consider a radical change in its labour system: “I think it is worth having one more try to continue running the country upon the old lines of the white man in the superior position and the black man kept in his place. There is no doubt that for the ultimate good of the country this is the right policy. (Jeeves 1985b)

The labour shortage on the Rand was accompanied by a fall in the price of gold from September 1919, when five London banks instated the gold standard, fixing the price of gold on the world market and making it impossible for South African companies to pass their high extraction costs on to consumers. The gold standard led to a twenty-seven percent drop in gold prices from 130 shillings an ounce to 95 shillings an ounce, bringing on an industry crisis as “twenty-eight out of thirty-five mines were unable to mine gold profitably” (Allen 1992, 304). As a result of these combined circumstances, “about half of South Africa’s gold mines, employing half of the labour force, were unable to mine gold profitably and were defined as ‘low grade ore’ mines” (Allen 1992, 304).

From the point of view of the mine owners the issue was clear. The crisis had arisen because of the discrepancy between the price of gold, which was beyond their control, and the costs of production over which they had some influence. [...] The wages of black mineworkers

were already so depressingly low that it was virtually impossible to reduce them further. This left them with the price of white labour, therefore, as the only substantial variable over which they had any influence. As it happened it was the one which had grown most during the war years. The crisis, then, was clearly about the relationship between the mine owners and the white miners. (Allen 1992, 304)

To save costs, mine owners announced the replacement of 10,000 White mineworkers with Blacks, who were paid drastically lower wages. This led to escalating tensions between the two factions and in February 1920, “some 71 000 [Black] men came out on strike for better pay, for lower prices in the compound stores, and against the colour bar” (Wilson 1972).

In 1921, South Africa, like the rest of the world, slid into an economic depression, a transition that intensified the crisis in the mining industry and led to an inevitable confrontation between mine owners and White workers. Strikes that broke out in early 1922 quickly escalated into the mass labour movement that came to be known as the Rand Revolt. In January, 22,000 White mineworkers struck, leading to the imposition of martial law by the Smuts government, which further intervened with 7000 troops and artillery and bomber aircraft (Allen 1992). Together, these events contributed to the defeat of Smuts’ pro-British South African Party during the 1924 election. The new Prime Minister, J.B.M. Hertzog, who had campaigned on a platform that promised redress for landless Whites and fearful White labourers, immediately began building on the segregationist policies that had been part of the official fabric of the Union of South Africa since its formation in 1910. Under Hertzog, a series of government acts combined to deepen segregation, protecting the jobs of White workers and voters while securing a continued supply of cheap labour. His Industrial Conciliation Act, which commenced in April 1924, excluded Blacks from membership of

registered trade unions and prohibited registration of Black trade unions, while the Minimum Wages Act of 1925 earmarked certain trades for Whites, leading to a form of job reservation and promotion of White employment.

In response to the increasingly oppressive and segregationist White government, Blacks formed the South African Native National Congress in 1912, the party that in 1923 became the African National Congress, the familiar ANC. The origins of the party were far from radical: its leaders were mission-educated Christians,

Western-oriented middle-class people, the products of the best schools available. They aimed to realize the promise inherent in the Cape colonial tradition, first by gaining full equality with Whites for the middle classes they represented, and later by extending the benefits to the masses of their people. The precedent they had in mind was the step-by-step extension of the parliamentary franchise to all classes in England. They sought by rational argument and pressure within the framework of the constitution to persuade the white electorate to reverse the discriminatory tide. (Thompson 2000, 174)

Yet their efforts to advance the social and economic wellbeing of Black South Africans by constitutional means met with little success. Not only did they fail to win any substantial ground from Whites determined to maintain the status quo, but, mired in organizational incapacities and financial constraints, they were unable to garner mass support (Thompson 2000, South African History Online 2017).

Clearly, although apartheid officially began with the election of D.F. Malan's Nationalist Party in 1948 by a slim majority, an array of contributing factors had been brewing for decades. Segregationist strategies had long become established through the

labour, settlement, and military policies and with them Whites reiterated and enacted their power over dispossessed Blacks who, through both White imperial power and a variety of conspiring calamitous events, had seen the loss of both their land and their independent livelihoods over these years. As I describe in the following section, along with political upheaval that brought about radical change in terms relationships of landscapes and dwelling places, new textual and spiritual forms further altered these dynamics, fundamentally shifting the balance between men and women, the living and their dead.

Women: Rural and on the rand

Despite the new freedoms it afforded, urban South African society was also a space of exclusion that took shape in the absence of Black women who remained systematically barred from it. Largely confined to rural hinterlands with children, the infirm and the elderly, most women eked out a subsistence living punctuated by the often violent homecomings of their itinerant husbands (Mbeki 1964, Biko 2004, Qabula 1989). Histories of colonial South Africa and the emergence of the migrant labour system have tended to exclude the particular effect of these historical developments on women. As in other contexts, the emergence of capitalism in South Africa is generally framed as a masculine process in which male conquerors dispossessed other men of their lands and traditional livelihoods and coerced them into White industries. In these histories, South Africa becomes a terrain of vying masculinities in which emasculated Blacks enacted new masculinities as physical labourers.

Such histories omit the particular ways in which women experienced capitalism's assault on landscape, bodies, and society. They also overlook the effects that the experiences and resistance efforts of women had on social and environmental transformations and popular resistance to them. As Krikler (1996) makes clear, White women were very much a

force in the Rand Revolt and the events surrounding it, although they are largely excluded from historical accounts. Using time-honoured stereotypes and gender relationships to their advantage, they played an active and often violently aggressive role in the strike, fundamentally challenging gender norms in the process (Krikler 1996). Where Black women were able to enter the urban realm, as Mgwetho was, they found access to new possibilities they had been excluded from in traditional society with its complex social codes and gender roles. For example, writing under a pseudonym for print publications, Mgwetho found possibilities for vehement, politically-engaged speech that would have been closed to her in the more traditional rural spaces where oral speech made anonymity impossible.

Yet while traditional society may have been claustrophobic for forward-thinking women, it would be simplistic to claim that traditional society is simply oppressively patriarchal. Rather, it is structured around nuanced understandings of role and obligation that differ according to gender. As Laretta Ngcobo points out, mothers in traditional amaXhosa society held an important spiritual position in their communities:

[The] all important need for children has led to the institutionalizing of motherhood through fertility rites, taboos and beliefs and has acquired some religious significance. For a man it has become a sacred duty towards his whole lineage. Failure to immortalize the ancestors is taboo and a shame that a man cannot bear. As a result, childlessness is associated with women, for the alternative is unthinkable. Central to many African beliefs is that there are three states of human existence – the land of the unborn, the land of the living and the land of the ancestors and the dead. Belief has it that the children of any given family are always there waiting for the mothers to come and rescue

them from oblivion and bring them to live in the land of the living. Failure therefore, to “rescue” the children is a sorrowful capitulation and a betrayal. In cases of childlessness, people do not think of and share the couple’s or woman’s agony – rather, they hear the echoing cries of the unborn children that she (the mother) will not “rescue” and bring to life. [...] This makes the position of motherhood socially and cosmologically very central. (Ngcobo 2007)

As this passage makes clear, Western conceptions of gender and gender roles can easily fail to capture the complexities of Black South African life. Western feminism has been criticised for taking biased views of Black gender relations, placing a disproportionate emphasis on the ways in which Black women are oppressed and downtrodden within traditional contexts while failing to explore the intricacies of Black women’s strengths and successes (Cornwall 2005). “Gender’ as it is understood in Western feminist discourse did not exist in Africa prior to the colonial imposition of a dichotomous model that rendered women subordinate, residual and inferior to men” (Cornwall 2005, 5). In traditional society, gender was part of multidimensional social categories with networks of obligations and constraints, rather than the relatively simple category that Western terms tend to produce. The colonial era imposed a Victorian model of “monogamous male breadwinners and subservient wives” (Cornwall 2005, 5) while stamping out diverse alternatives that saw women responsible for much of the agricultural and craft production, enabling a degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency that interfered with capitalism’s expansion. As Judith Stevenson points out in a discussion of changing conceptions of motherhood in Tswana society,

Christianity and colonization [...] sought to transform African gender

systems, re-focusing women's roles as sisters, wives, daughters, and mothers, on to a purely domestic level, thus ideologically and practically attempting to remove them from public influence and diminishing their status. [...] In the Christian model of womanhood given to them by nineteenth-century missionaries, black women were not permitted to take leadership roles in church administration or public affairs. They were to remain in the home as mothers and wives. In the traditional African model of motherhood and womanhood, however, women saw themselves (and were recognized as) competent leaders in both the domestic and public spheres. This placed women in an ideological contradiction: How to remain devout Christian women who would gain the admiration and support of their community and patriarchal church structures, and at the same time claim their cultural position of social and political authority? (Stevenson 2011, 138, 140)

Thus, while various aspects of the gender-determined social norms of traditional amaXhosa society—the patterns of avoidance associated with respectful speech, the restrictions on tasks that each gender is able to perform, limitations on the ways in which members of each gender may interact or move around household spaces—may appear oppressively patriarchal by Western outsiders, they should be viewed instead as a complex and nuanced set of reciprocities and obligations that order social and spiritual interactions and maintain an harmonious social whole.

Ecocritical aspects of Mgqwetho's verse

It was into this turbulent national scene and social context that Nontsizi Mgqwetho emerged

with the publication of her first poem in the isiXhosa newspaper *Umteteli waBantu* in 1920. Over the decade that followed, she would go on to publish nearly one hundred poems that spoke directly to the issues of her time, calling for an end to White domination and for the unity of her people in addressing the struggles and injustices they faced. Her poetry laments the confusion and conflict that, by the 1920s, had come to define the amaXhosa experience: internecine strife and jealousies, spiritual and cultural upheaval, alcoholism, exploitation, and abuse at the hands of Whites.

Like the labourers she joined on the rapidly urbanizing Witwatersrand, Mqgqwetho was also a rural transplant who found herself living in an alien industrial environment according to a new and unstable set of social and cultural norms. Although little is known about her life, she was certainly a member of the Rharhabe kingdom and the Chizama clan and there is evidence to suggest that she hailed from the small town of Peddie, or the neighbouring village of Tamara, in the Ciskeian region of the Eastern Cape, however these and other details of her life are speculative (Opland 2007).

Mqgqwetho's poetry suggests close personal ties with a rural homeland, despite her life as an urban woman on the Rand. As Opland (2007) writes, "Animals feature prominently too, the sheltering wing of a mother hen, the spots on a leopard, the stalking lion, the cow yielding only dribbles of milk and the hyenas that Christians turn into at night. Although she writes removed from her home country, her imagery is that of the countryside, rural rather than urban" (xxvi). As a migrant herself, Mqgqwetho's poetry draws together the concerns and landscapes of both rural and urban; rather than painting them as separate and divided realms, it reveals a continuum in which urban nodes are linked to the rural by a fluid movement of people between rural homes and urban workplaces, knitting the cultures and psyches of the two realms.

For example, in “I Afrika ihleli Ayiyangandawo!” (“Africa stayed! She’s nowhere else!?”) she writes,

I Afrika ihleli ayiyangandawo
Kangela enceni wofik’ isahluma
Kangela imitombo yamanz’ isatsitsa
Kangela yonkinto imi ngendlelayo

Africa stayed! She’s nowhere else!!
Look how the grass continues to sprout.
Look at the springs still bubbling with water.
Look all around, it’s all in its place!

Uti “Mayibuye?” makubuye wena
Nezizwe zomhlaba zix’witana ngawe
Zipuma e Node zipuma e Sude
Kwasempumalanga nase Ntshonalanga

You say “Come back”? *You* must come back!!
You’re profit to all the earth’s nations:
they come from the north, they come from the south,
out of the east and out of the west.

Zip’ intombi zenu? Izwi liyintoni
Sigqibe lomhlaba sishweshwe zihange
Site nzwi nendlebe butywala bomlungu
Kodwa yen’ umlungu akabudl’ obetu.

Where are your daughters? What do you say?
“We roamed the countryside, shackled up with gangsters,
we’re up to the ears in the white man’s booze.”
But the white doesn’t drink a drop of yours.
(Mgqwetho 2007, 122)

In these stanzas, Mgqwetho angrily derides not only the exploitation of Black South Africans whose lives and bodies are abused for foreign profit, but the complicity of Blacks themselves in an exploitative and unjust colonial culture that has no interest in reciprocity or mutual learning. It is impossible for the land and nation of South Africa to enjoy the wealth and freedoms of its past without the willing participation and commitment of Blacks to a vision of a different future rather than that offered by Whites. In Mgqwetho’s view, South Africa itself has not changed, but the minds and hearts of her compatriots have. In this poem, as in others, Mgqwetho makes her political point through natural imagery juxtaposed with descriptions of urbanization and its social transformations, suggesting that “coming back” to Africa may mean a return to rural ancestral homelands from the cities that are manifestations of the false promises of Whites. Despite their complicity with the new White society and

their exploited and downtrodden position within it, there is plenty of vigour with which to make real change if Blacks desire it:

Ingonyama yobumnyama isgquma
Napakati kwetu zizwe ezimnyama
Masivumise ke nase zazulwini
Zabafa kudala nabafa kutsha.
(Mgqwetho 2007, 221)

The lion of blackness still roars
from the midst of our black nations:
let's seek the truth from those above,
those long dead and the recent deceased.

Yet the call for a return to the ancestors' truths is complicated in other poems in which Mgqwetho points out the strengths and failings of both traditional and evolving modern realms. Even as she calls for a return to traditional African values, she resists turning to anti-colonial pastoral tropes used by other writers who suggest "that redemption can be achieved through the rejuvenation of indigenous cultural values and the struggle against the legacies—especially psychological and ideological legacies—of colonialism" (Caminero-Santangelo 2014). Instead, Mgqwetho complicates both the traditional and the colonial, alternately praising or castigating both Christianity and tradition, pointing to the problems that result from inaccurate interpretations of both. Rather than endorsing a return to a non-European past, she embraces the Christianity that is the legacy of White conquest while problematizing particular interpretations of the scriptures and their malleability to suit particular agendas:

Izwi nabelungu kade lafikayo
Sixakiwe lilo kuba linxa zonke
Liko ngaku Tixo kuti ligalele—
(Mgqwetho 2007, 213)

Long ago the whites brought the word;
we're confused that it bends with the wind:
over there it's with God, over here it flogs us.

While she refuses to reinvent the precolonial past as a romanticized world of bucolic beauty and harmony, she nevertheless champions the traditions and beliefs of the Reds, those amaXhosa who have not converted to Christianity. This overall sense of ambivalence is expressed throughout her poetry, both in her oeuvre as a whole and in individual poems

or stanzas, for example, in “A Red Debates with Christians” Mgqwetho adopts the position of a traditionalist berating Christians:

Aninalutando aninayo nani	You’re bereft of love, bereft of all,
Kodwa nizibiza no Tixo wotando	Yet you proclaim a God of love:
Lonkolwana yenu yokusikohlisa	that faith of yours stands just as tall
Mina ingangam ndiguqe ngedolo	as I do down on my knees.

Nakufika kuti tina bomaqaba	If you ever try to come near us again,
Tina sakunoja siti niyinyama.	we Reds will roast you like meat.
Anditsho ukuti Izwi lika Tixo	But I’m not saying the word of God
Ukuteta kwalo akunanyaniso.	is entirely bereft of truth.

(Mgqwetho 2007, 11)

Similarly, in “Liquor’s the Lightening Bird Itself,” Mgqwetho unfurls fiery denouncements only to throw them into ambiguity in here closing stanza.

Anditsho ke ukuti busisono	I don’t insist that drinking’s a sin,
Ndingatsho nokuti abusiso isono	then again, I’m not saying it’s not;
Kodwa ke konke okudaliweyo	There’s a lesson for us
Kuti—kunentshumayelo yako.	In all that occurs.

(Mgqwetho 2007, 176)

Mgqwetho’s conflicted portrayal of social and environmental themes and the conflicted relationships between not only Blacks and Whites but also Reds and Christians resembles the division between rural and urban created by colonialism that Frantz Fanon describes:

The country people are suspicious of the townsman. The latter dresses like a European; he speaks the European’s language, works with him, sometimes even lives in the same district; so he is considered by the peasants as a turncoat who has betrayed everything that goes to make up the national heritage...Here, we are not dealing with the old antagonism between town and country, it is the antagonism which exists between the native who is excluded from the advantages of

colonialism and his counterpart who manages to turn colonial exploitation to his own account. (Fanon 2001, 89)

In a similar vein, Mqgqwetho calls out those who have betrayed their own in their bid to curry favour with Whites:

Siyay' binza i Afrika makowetu!
Ngokuntamana sibulala amawetu
Seside sanxiba—ke nemix'aka
Yamawonga abulala i Afrika.

My people, we're stabbing Africa,
We kill our own through betrayal:
we court celebrity status,
honours for killing Africa.

Elonxeba e Afrika libuhlungu
Sesicenga ngamawetu kubelungu
Xa ndilapo, andinazintlon' ukutsho
Kwanemisebenzi nantso nayo itso.

When we trade our own people to whites for profit
we inflict a deep wound on Africa.
I'm not one to shy from saying so:
your public behaviour bears eloquent witness.
(Mqgqwetho 2007, 178)

Yet even as the upheaval and urbanization of the nineteenth and early twentieth century wrought havoc on social life, it also opened possibilities for Mqgqwetho that were unheard of for women of previous generations. Not only did she learn to read and write, but she applied this skill with chutzpah and verve, becoming one of the most prolific and accomplished poets of her time. Stepping into the opportunities that a changing South Africa afforded her required a large degree of fearlessness which Mqgqwetho clearly possessed in ample quantity. Her poetry suggests that she rode a wave of change, leaving her rural homeland and stepping into a new life on the Rand as a childless, unmarried woman. Given the traditional worldviews and spiritualities that would have tightly circumscribed women's lives during her time, her visionary dissension involved a degree of courage that contemporary commentators may overlook. From her debut poem in the newspaper *Umteteli waBantu*, Mqgqwetho acknowledges the gender politics of this new territory and launches herself in regardless, from her first poems establishing herself as an imbongi with the right

and indeed the duty to criticize openly. As she points out in “Imbongi u Chizama” (“Chizama the poet”), poets have always been male; only now, in “the land of thugs and booze,” is possible for her to respond to her calling and express herself freely.

Hamba Sokulandela,
Kuba tina simadoda nje asizange
Siyibone kowetu imbongikazi
Yenkazana kuba imbongi inyuka
Nenkundla ituke inkosi.

Go and we'll follow you:
no female poet
came from our house:
the poet who rouses the court
and censures the king's always male.

Hamba Sokulandela,
Nezi mbongikazi Tina sizibona
Apa kweli lo laita ne bhkile.

Go and we'll follow you!
We first encountered these female poets
here in this land of thugs and booze.
(Mgqwetho 2007, 2)

The changing social landscape opened new possibilities for expression that were unavailable in the traditional realm, where defying the rules and cultural norms associated with speech brought harsh physical consequences. In a later poem, Mgqwetho tells us,

Taru! Nontsizi intombi ka Sandile
Mntana wenkosi kwinkosi zakwa Ngqika
Kubonga amakosi not amabhungexe
Watshiswa zinduku kumata^P akwa Ngqika.

Mercy, Nontsizi, Sandile's daughter,
child of the Ngqika paramount.
You were thrashed by kieres on Ngqika plains
for praising chiefs and *not* commoners.
(Mgqwetho 2007, 80)

The lines illustrate the physical consequences women faced in daring to practice as iimbongi. As Thulani Nxasana (2016) explains, “Mgqwetho was censured and assaulted by kieres (which only men carried) for attempting to praise chiefs. This was taboo in Xhosa society and she was disciplined for doing that; women could bonga (praise) but only imbongi could praise chiefs or hold the status of imbongi.” Women were prevented from becoming iimbongi, a poetic tradition rooted in naming, because of the limitations on their ability to utter names. Traditionally, women were forbidden from uttering the names of the chiefs or their ancestors while married women show respect for husband's ancestors through

hlonipha⁸ speech that involves the avoidance of particular words because of their association with the forefathers. In households that adhere to this tradition, avoided words are substituted with synonyms to form a richly allusive language that informs and extends isiXhosa poetry.

With the arrival of Christianity, new spiritual priorities and teachings led to a decline not only in the traditional importance ascribed to ancestral spirits but also in the weight and power formerly held by the spoken word. It is surely no coincidence that not only did Christianity negate ancestor veneration, but the print media that Christian missionaries introduced also brought about a shift in understandings of literature and in the power dynamics surrounding the possession, circulation and transmission of words, names, and knowledge. Furthermore, Christianity loosened the traditional bonds within families and communities in that it “provided a more individualist moral alternative to the bonds of rural African communality” (Beinart 2001, 107). Both the religion and the print medium introduced by missionaries changed the dynamics of language media, destabilizing and reconfiguring traditional relationships between men and women, youth and elders, living and dead, and upending notions of culture, intellect, and eloquence. Notably, the arrival of print media and particularly the newspaper had a resonating effect on gender relations:

For Mqgqwetho the newspaper becomes a vehicle of self-expression and assertion; in traditional Xhosa society she would never be given a public platform to criticise and speak in such terms to a man. Also, because she is in the city where all things traditionally taboo are permissible, and she is an unmarried woman, these factors liberate her to speak and she makes full use of the empowering space she takes up

⁸ Literally, “respect.”

in the city and in the newspaper. If she were in the rural space, her father or husband, if she were married, would be addressed and instructed to keep her in line and discipline her [...]. By virtue of her being a woman she would be relegated to a passive and subservient position. (Nxasana 2016, 15)

With her defiant debut in *Umteteli waBantu*, Mgqwetho signaled her audacity with respect to amaXhosa tradition and its adherents and her willingness to speak out in her own terms—in spite of the potentially dire consequences that such “speech” might bring. In doing so, she straddled the complex transition not only from traditional to modern, but also from oral to written text and the changing meanings and spiritual understandings that such transitions entailed. For example, Ong tells us that among oral peoples generally “language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought [...] oral peoples commonly, and probably universally, consider words to have great power,” and, in particular, that they “commonly think of names (one kind of words) as conveying power over things” (Ong 2002, 32). Seen in this light, taboos regarding the utterance of names gain additional depth, since it is understandably inappropriate for certain groups to attempt to exercise their power over others through naming:

The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded and hence power-driven. Deeply typographic folk tend to forget to think of words as primarily oral, as events, and hence as necessarily powered. (Ong 2002, 32)

While Ashlee Nesor claims that “for Xhosa poets like Yali-Manisi, Mqhayi and Mqgwetho, there is no contradiction in using print to harness the rhythms, authorities and ways of speaking offered by oral genres” (Nesor 2011, 67), this appraisal seems relatively simplistic, particularly when considered alongside Nesor’s competing claim that “written izibongo must, in Opland’s sense, fail as sacred invocation because it solidifies its expression and publishes community in profane contexts of print circulation” (Nesor 2011). While there may not be a contradiction between written and oral, the two media clearly differ profoundly, with different purposes, audiences and resonances. Much more than simply harnessing the rhythms of speech or defying gender norms, Mqgwetho’s poetry calls into question fundamental understandings about the nature of the spoken word, the power of names to call forth the ancestral shades and accepted notions of who had the right to exercise such power and under what circumstances. For these reasons, Mqgwetho also has a complex relationship with both the oral and the written word; the former, with its tight linkages to tradition, limited possibilities for her as a woman while writing and print publications opened possibilities of expression that would not have been available in the traditional realm.

Thus Mqgwetho’s relationships with both tradition and modernity are complicated; she is unpredictable in both compliance and defiance and these instabilities are reflected in her poems. In some poems, for example, Mqgwetho defers to tradition, writing “Amagama enkosi ayandipazamisa,” “The names of kings confuse me,” or “Ndifungo k’ok’o nobawo ndizalayo,” “I swear by my shades, and my father who sired me,”⁹ thus avoiding the contentious act of naming (Nxasana 2016). Whether such avoidance was a bid to appease her audiences or the ancestors themselves is unclear, but it is certain that for such a strong believer in both Christian and amaXhosa traditions, Mqgwetho’s acts of defiance may have

⁹ i.e., Ancestral shades.

exposed her not only to physical harm from men with kieries, but also to the potential malevolence of offended ancestral spirits.

Clearly, then, Mqgqwetho's understanding of and relationship with tradition is much different from that of her male peers. When she calls for a return to traditional values, it is with full understanding of the complications associated with these values, the unfreedoms they impose and the ways in which their constraints are felt unequally by different members of society. Mqgqwetho is under no illusions about the restrictions and limitations of pre-colonial amaXhosa society; rather than romanticizing, she complicates traditional and contemporary society alike, acknowledging the literary possibilities that the latter opened for her that were "not possible in the rural space where Mqgqwetho herself was physically assaulted by knobkierries" for her defiant speech (Nxasana 2009, 76).

Yet even as the "loss of traditional values in the city" enabled Mqgqwetho "to take up the title and position of imbongi through the medium of newspapers, a space and position denied her in the rural space because of her gender," the extent to which she speaks through a variety of assumed personae, often while writing under a *nom de plume* suggests that the relationship between the woman poet and her readership was also complicated and possibly fraught (Nxasana 2009, 76). Faced with social codes that prevented her from playing a public role in literature and politics, Mqgqwetho adopted various strategies, including the technique of writing from the perspective of different voices that she uses to amplify her own arguments and concerns: "At times, she speaks in the stentorian and largely male voice of the praise poet/prophet admonishing corrupt and ineffective leadership and delivering jeremiads against those in authority. At times, she adopts the position of the male/female diviner and healer, offering her poems as prognostications and diagnoses" (Hofmeyr 2007). Thus, even as "Mqgqwetho advocates for the return to traditional African values," she also

notes “the advantages of moving [out] of the traditional rural setting into the city” (Nxasana 2009, 76).

Mgqwetho’s stance thus suggests not a wholesale embracing of one way (traditional values and philosophy) and abandoning the other (modern values and philosophy) but negotiating and transforming these two spaces by valorising and extracting from them what is good and beneficial for the benefit of all people, male and female, which she herself embodies as a modern female *imbongi*. (Nxasana 2009, 76)

For Mgqwetho, shifting gender roles are both emblematic and metaphorical of broader social shifts and upheavals going on around her. For example, in “Ingxoxo yo Mginwa ku Magqoboka!” (“A Red Debates with Christians”) she berates Christianity from the perspective of an adherent of amaXhosa tradition.

Zip’ intombi zenu Izwi liyintoni	Where are your daughters? What do you say?
Zigqibe lomhlaba zifuna ukwenda	They crossed the land in search of marriage,
Ziqeshe zindlwana zishweshe utuli	shamelessly shackled up with live-in lovers,
Zibet’ onomtatsi kwa Tulandivile!	cavorted in dances with young men in New Clare.
Onina balila amehlo azidudu	With eyes of porridge their mothers bemoan
Kushiywa lusapo lumka bekangele	their absent children, who left them standing,
Beyala belila bengenakuviwa	advising blank air and pleading in vain
Zintombi zemfundo nonyana bemfundo!	with sons and daughters who’ve all been to school.
	(Mgqwetho 2007, 50)

Later, she directly connects female vulnerability to dispossession and injustice in “Ub’inqo’! We-Afrika!” (“Africa’s petticoat”) wherein the dropping of petticoats signifies rape.

Mazitete! Nembongi mhla kwaw' inyembezi
 Zo "Mb'inqo" we Afrika sincede Mhlekazi
 Owawupilisa umpfumlo wo Hlanga
 Lwezizwe Zintsundu ngapantsi kwe Langa.
 [...]
 Wawa! Ngenyani "Umb'inqo" we Afrika
 Kwane Bhaibhile isongwa isomb'uluka
 Apo zikon' inkosi zase mlungwini
 Ezi ne bhaibhile ezingo mb'axa-mbini.

Let poets speak of the day of tears
 for Africa's petticoat—please, Sir—
 which restored the soul of the land
 of every Black nation under the sun.
 [...]
 Truly, Africa's petticoat's dropped!
 The bible slips from our hands and slams shut;
 in that world of white lords and masters
 the bible speaks with forked tongue.
 (Mgqwetho 2007, 208)

Mgqwetho's poetry reveals her exhaustive knowledge of the scriptures and assumes that her readers are similarly knowledgeable about biblical references. At the same time, passages such as this one also demonstrate an ambivalence toward Christianity and its book that speaks with a devilishly forked tongue. Missionaries were as much agents of dispossession as they were spiritual emissaries, and Mgqwetho suffers no illusions about the ulterior motives of Whites, whatever their clothing and spiritual inclinations. In South Africa, particularly in Eastern Cape province and among the amaXhosa that are the focus of this study, missionaries played a large part in colonization. Perhaps more than any other group, their project was the complete conversion and revolution of traditional African life (Mudimbe 1988). In consolidating their power, missionaries used discursive approaches: "derision of so-called primitive religions and their gods, refutation and demonstration to convince the evolving Africans, and imposition of rules and orthodoxy and conformity for converts" (Mudimbe 1988, 52). Because they considered their project of expanding Christian dominion to be a project sanctioned by God, missionaries had no trouble justifying humane and oppressive tactics alike. Christianity and its discourse were thus key features of the spread of European empires: "With equal enthusiasm, [the missionary] served as an agent of a political empire a representative of civilization and an envoy of God. There is no essential contradiction between these roles. All of them implied the same purpose: the conversion of

African minds and space” (Mudimbe 1988, 47).

This “conversion of African minds” was aided in no small part by missionary control of the publishing industry established in the Eastern Cape with the importation of a mission-owned printing press in 1823 (Opland 1998). Colonial control of the publishing industry as well as the institutions that disseminated the printed word for much of the nineteenth century ensured that people were shielded from ideas that missionaries considered subversive and that available materials reinforced a narrow spectrum of colonial thought (Ngugi 1986, Opland 1998). Missionaries established an orthography for the isiXhosa language which they kept tightly controlled; they also determined the content of published materials, placing tight restrictions on the content of publications issued by missionary-controlled presses (Opland 1998, 1983). In Mqgqwetho’s case, Christianity provided a guiding moral and religious framework but also spurred her fiery and rebellious verses. The decade in which she wrote marked a breakthrough decade for isiXhosa literature; “the slow groundswell of books published in the first twenty years of the century crested after 1920, when major works of poetry, fiction, drama, biography and folklore appeared” (Opland 1998, 195). African-language newspapers, which began to appear in the mid-nineteenth century, grew into a major vehicle for the publication of isiXhosa literature and extended the rich literary heritage established by nineteenth century missionary presses. Newspapers played a significant role in the development of literary genres and styles and provided a forum for vibrant debate among the Black intelligentsia.

It is noteworthy that Mqgqwetho chose *Umteteli waBantu*, “The People’s Spokesman,” as her venue. Established by the Chamber of Mines and the Native Recruiting Corporation in the wake of the mine strike of 1920 and published weekly until 1956, *Umteteli waBantu* was designed to counter the more radical newspaper, *Abantu Batho* (Opland 1998). Established in

1912, “chiefly as an official mouthpiece of the newly established South African Native National Congress (SANNC),” *Abantu Batho* was published in English, SeSotho, isiZulu, isiXhosa and SeTswana, making it the most widely read Black newspaper in South Africa (South African History Online 2013a). The paper commented on a variety of political issues and current affairs, including the inequality and exploitation of Black workers in general and their resistance during the 1918 municipal workers’ bucket strike, the 1919 pass protests and the 1920 African miners’ strike (South African History Online 2013a). It also took a particular interest in women’s rights during these years, “For instance, between 1917 and 1918 the paper published detailed reports of women to organize themselves and gave coverage to Charlotte Maxeke, a women’s organizer, who urged women ‘to get themselves ready for struggle’” (South African History Online 2013a). Yet the increasingly radical views of the paper upset both mine owners and conservative members of SANNC opposed to the growing communist presence in the pages of *Abantu Batho* as well as within their own organization (Opland 1998). The response, *Umteteli waBantu*, aimed to appeal to moderate Blacks on the Witwatersrand and in its recruiting areas, competing with *Abantu Batho* not only for the same readership but also for many of the same contributors, who were offered higher pay for their services (South African History Online 2013b, a). *Umteteli*’s editorial policy, as expressed in its 30 August 1924 issue, stated, “We are charged to preach racial amity, to foster a spirit of give and take, to promote the will to co-operate, to emphasize the obligations of black and white to themselves and to each other, and generally to create an atmosphere in which peace and goodwill might thrive” (Couzens 1985, qtd in Opland 1998, 252). These editorial efforts resulted in “a major contribution to Xhosa literature: for twenty-five years its pages were filled with creative writing of the highest order” (Opland 1998). Meanwhile, political tensions between the papers simmered; Mqgqwetho’s fourth poem

attacked *Abantu Batho* and its editor for its criticism of *Umteteli* “for splitting African ranks” (Opland 1998).

Hawulele! Hule!

Wena “Abantu-Batho”
Wawuba uyakusala
Negama lobugosa.

Hawulele! Hule!

Abantu-Batho,
you thought you’d retain
the title of guardian.

Umteteli wa Bantu

Kudala akubonayo
Uyimvaba engenawo namanzi
Eyode izale onojubalalana.

Umteteli wa Bantu

saw right through you:
you’re a sack without water
left to breed tadpoles.

Abantu bayapela

Kukufunzwa eweni
Kuba abanamnyangi
Obabhulel’imiti.

Our people are spent,

urged over the edge,
lacking healers
to administer cures.

Imbongikazi iyile?

Ndandizakukusukela pi?
Kuba kwelopepa lako
Ndoginywa yimilomo yengonyama.

The woman poet joined you?

Where did we talk?
In that paper of yours
I’d be torn in the jaws of a lion.

[...]

Akuyazi wena Myabaza

Nendalo ka Tixo
Naku nam soundenza
Imbong’kazi ka “Abantu Batho”

[...]

Myabaza, you’re blind

to God’s creation,
wanting me woman poet
of your *Abantu-Batho*.

Uyavula wena weza

Nembongikazi e Ngqushwa
Ukuba mayizokukwenzela
Isonka e Rautini
Sakubona

You brag that you brought

the woman poet from Peddi
to earn your bread
in Johannesburg!
That’ll be the day!

(Mgqwetho 2007)

These struggles for control of the discursive space took place alongside rising political struggles that included the evolving presence of the African National Congress and

the tightening and enforcement of imposed racial divisions. Mqgqwetho responds to these conditions throughout her poetry and urges her compatriots to do likewise. For instance, in “Ukutula! Ikwakukuvuma!” (“Silence implies consent”), Mqgqwetho displays the traditional spirited energy of an imbongi rousing her audience to action over the state of the country, beginning with speaking out to bring an end to compliant silence.

Taru! Mhleli ngesituba sezi Mbongi!
Asinakutula umhlab’ ubolile
Xa ndikubonisa ubume bomhlaba
Angabhekabheka onk’amagqoboka.

Editor, thanks for the poets’ column,
we can’t sit silent, the country’s rotten:
if I exposed the state of the country
the Christians’ jaws would drop.

Ukutula! Ikwakukuvuma
Xa ungatandi ukuhlala ujanyelwa
Ungapendula kwabezinye imvaba
Akulunganga ukukonza unomkanya

Silence implies consent!
White eyes sear us on entering a church,
But we’re free to worship someplace else:
It’s no fun to pray looking over your shoulder.

Lemiteto idlula eka Moses
Lihasa kuwe eliza ngokutula
Litupa lengwe lanyatel’esangweni
Kuba ngokutula! Bati uyavuma!

The laws outnumber those of Moses!
They dish out your portion if you sit silent:
It’s the tracks of a leopard across your yard.
If you sit silent they say you agree.

(Mqgqwetho 2007, 158)

As Byron Caminero-Santangelo describes, the depiction of Africa by the West as a place of savage wilderness and natural beauty has worked against “Africans’ agency and humanity” even as it has facilitated “patterns of unjust extractive and ecological enclaves, and socioecological transformation on a massive scale” (Caminero-Santangelo 2014). In presenting alternatives to the “stereotypical naturalizing representations of the continent,” Mqgqwetho, like other African writers, insists not only on different understandings of the African continent and African environments, but also on alternative understandings of human relationships with those environments and with the global forces that have so disrupted them. These themes are evident throughout Mqgqwetho’s poetry, despite the fact

that, by and large, the poems don't ostensibly deal with environmental themes in a Western sense. While her poetry is indeed rich in natural imagery, these are not used to construct a sense of "environment" in a manner familiar to the Western imagination. Instead, both natural and built environments appear to be for Mqgqwetho terrains of political struggle in which untenable disruptions have left her no choice but to join the fight for land, culture, society, and spirituality in the avenues newly available to her.

Notably, even as she acknowledges the pain of dispossession and the undisciplined power of Whites to wreak havoc on her people and her country, Mqgqwetho does not allow her people to escape responsibility for the state of their nation. In many poems, including this passage from "Isizwe! Esingavaniyo! Nesingavelaniyo! Siyadwatywa Zezinye!!" ("Strangers strip a squabbling nation"), Mqgqwetho gives voice to the heartbreak of her dispossessed people whom she holds responsible for their own ongoing suffering:

Vusa! Inimba yakumakowenu	Induce birth pangs in your people,
Yakulo Ngubenc'uka kwezakowenu	as in Ngubencuka's time;
Utete ngelidala ngelika Hintsa	speak as of old in Hintsa's voice.
Amagama enkosi ayandipazamisa	(The names of kings confuse me.)
Shu! Hay' into imbi ukufa kwe Sizwe	Shu! The death of a nation's painful!
Obuzabuzayo ubuza nto nina	Why seek the why and the wherefore?
Siluhlantlalala olungenabani	We're just a dispossessed rabble,
Into zokudwatywa zicangalaliswe.	fit to be stripped for thrashing.
	(Mqgqwetho 2007, 170)

Later, she denounces the oppressive presence of Whites in South Africa, yet quietly chastises her kinsfolk for their short-sightedness and naïveté in failing to see the true colours of the intruders:

Kanti nene nene beza kutshutshisa	The simple truth is they came to oppress, ¹⁰
Nge bhaibhile zabo beza kunyelisa	they came to blaspheme with their bibles,

¹⁰ n.b. A more literal translation of "ukutshutshiswa" is "persecute" ("oppress" is "ukucinezela").

Safika sonke tina mzi ka Ngqika
Sangayiboni nalo ntsimbi yomxaka.

and all of us in Ngqika's House
failed to suspect their armbands of iron.
(Mgqwetho 2007, 230)

At the same time, the poem goes on to describe how the early relationship between Whites and the amaXhosa was not straightforward; given the spiritual and material largesse of the Whites, the ongoing conflict and turmoil of the relationship is understandable:

Asivi ngandaba sibona ngamehlo
Azi batini bona abanamehlo
Izwe selimfusa ayawa amag'ora
Izwe lobawo namhla lizingxondora.

There is no hearsay, we actually saw it.
What do the far-sighted make of all this?
Our country's benighted, our heroes fall,
In the land of our fathers lie rough mounds today.

Baduda benetemba lezi Bhalo
Lahlani pantsi eyenu imibhalo
Namhlanje sesifana nezimumu
Izwe lo bawo ligquma zinkanunu.

They danced with their faith in the scriptures:
"Discard your striped woolen blankets."
Today we resemble mutes.
In the land of our fathers the canons roar.

Mhla bafika kwakuyole de kwancama
Namawonga akowetu sawancama
Sakubona nalemfundo beze nayo
Ndifungu Ndlambe no bawo 'ndizalayo.

The day they arrived there was joy without measure.
We freely abandoned our majesty
on seeing the learning they brought,
I swear by Ndlambe and my father who sired me.
(Mgqwetho 2007, 230)

In these and other passages, Mgqwetho links land, dispossession, and spirituality in a seamless emotive flow. While she does so using the forms and devices of oral izibongo—rhythm, alliteration, exclamatory address—her poetry also conforms to formal elements of written poetry, including regular stanzas, regularly indented lines, and, in later poems, rhyme. Thus, even within the formal construction of the written texts, African and occidental traditions are actively engaged with one another, destabilizing one another, writing and rewriting the story of colonial encounter and its environmental legacy.

Conclusion

In fighting the eighty years of Frontier Wars against Afrikaner and British settlers, the amaXhosa took part in a much larger struggle than a battle for the ownership and control of territory. Their struggle was also waged for the economic, cultural, and spiritual independence that the land embodied and for the freedom to live on and with the landscape as they had always done. In pre-colonial emaXhoseni, independence was made possible by land and cattle and the independent economies and livelihoods that the land sustained. In the disastrous loss of land and independent nationhood that was the result of the amaXhosa cattle-killing, the cattle with whom the amaXhosa people lived so intimately were an extension of land and independence, a triumvirate in which the collapse of any one spelled the subsequent loss of the others. This final blow brought about a much larger shift that had begun with the arrival of missionaries nearly a century earlier. It resulted in a rift with the land and traditional livelihoods and social patterns as well as the transformation of environmental relationships through fundamentally altered spiritualities.

Nontsizi Mgqwetho is utterly unique; no other umXhosa woman before or since has produced a similar literary output. Certainly, she lived a bravely unconventional life for a woman of her era and exercised her ability to speak despite the various risks that such speech involved. Even more striking is the extent to which Mgqwetho engaged in a vigorous critique of the social processes of the new political economy that she saw unfolding around her. In particular, her poetry speaks to and about the divisions that she saw increasingly defining South African society. These divided conditions pitted rural against urban, White against Black, Christian against red in newly imposed dichotomies that were redefining social life and environmental relationships in an industrializing South Africa. Within this world, both nature and women were treated as “free goods” while new sexual divisions of labour

devalued women's work and role in society (Mies 1998). As a rural woman by birth writing from her urban home on the Rand, Mkgwetho speaks from a social segment that typically remains silent and silenced, prevented from public speech and sequestered in environments far from literary media. She thus brings to South African literature a perspective and voice that fearlessly challenged the emerging political and spiritual systems that constructed women and adherents of tradition as secondary citizens and actively constructed the structural conditions to keep them in that place.

Chapter 4: *Black Mamba* and the Durban/rural nexus

You moving forest of Africa!

When I arrived the children were all crying.

These were the workers, industrial workers,
discussing the problems in industrial work in Africa.

I saw one of them consoling others,
wiping their tears from their eyes.

I saw workers, because in his eyes too the tears flowed.

Worker, what's that cry "Maye" about?

You're crying, but who's hassling you?

Escape into that forest, the black forest that the employers saw and then ran for safety

The workers saw it too: "It belongs to us," they said.

"Let's take refuge in it to be safe from our hunters."

Deep in the forest they hid themselves, and when they came out they were free from fear.

(Qabula 1992, 259)

So opens "Praise Poem to FOSATU," performed by Alfred Themba Qabula during his first public appearance at a rally of the newly-formed Federation of South African Trade Unions in Durban in 1984 (Sitas 2003, Qabula 1992). Qabula, a migrant labourer and shop steward from the rural Transkei Bantustan, spent most of his working life as a forklift operator in the Dunlop tire factory in Durban. Growing up in the 1960s in the impoverished countryside of what is now Eastern Cape Province, his boyhood was a story of hunger, violence, and insecurity familiar to millions of rural South Africans. Yet as he took the stage that day,

roaring out his impassioned, impromptu lines before an audience of several thousand, Qabula became exceptional. Over the next decade, as a playwright, poet, performer, and organizer, he grew into a leading member of what was to become one of the most dynamic and innovative cultural movements in the country.

Qabula was part of a vibrant working class culture that arose from the South African labour movement of the 1970s and 80s. Drawing on traditional literary forms and motifs, the “worker poets” became a prominent voice of anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist resistance. Performed during union meetings and community gatherings before audiences of thousands, their poems encoded and represented the experiences of Black labourers and gave voice to their suffering (Malange 2016). As union membership surged throughout the 1980s, *iimbongi* played a pivotal role in articulating the experiences of an invisible working class, educating its rank and file, galvanizing labourers into action and promoting social cohesion in the pursuit of a common cause. In challenging the extractive theft inflicted on their communities and environments, the worker poets exemplify a version of environmentalism that resisted not only the exploitation of African labour under the apartheid regime but also the environmental injustice that this subjugation involved.

Resistance to White settlement and capitalist expansion was forceful and ongoing in South Africa from early colonial times onward, yet it was not until the Durban strike wave, student protests and township uprisings of the early to mid-1970s that fragmented resistance developed into the sweeping, unified force that would liberate the country. Following significant cultural shifts in the workplace and the removal of restrictions on union participation, South Africa’s labour movement grew into one of the country’s most significant instruments of rebellion and played a decisive role in the transition to democracy.

The movement owed its success to the strength, tenacity, and organization of its participants as well as to the passion and dedication that the worker poets helped inspire.

In 1986, poets Alfred Temba Qabula, Nise Malange, and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo published *Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle*, a collection of their poems originally performed in isiZulu during the years of union activism leading up to the formation of COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) in 1985. In the months and years following its publication, *Black Mamba* quickly gained international recognition and drew attention to the newly-formed Durban Workers' Cultural Local. This collective provided a venue for other labourers to perform and publish work that challenged and helped transform the oppressive power dynamics of apartheid South Africa. By the late 1980s, the labour uprising that the local was part of was having a profound effect on the political landscape of the country. COSATU, which at the time of its formation became the country's largest trade union with over half a million members, continued to grow in forces, swiftly becoming one of apartheid's most visible opponents (Mamdani 1996, Friedman 2015). In cooperation with the United Democratic Front (UDF), it helped launch a series of nationwide strikes and stayaways that, combined with a nationwide resistance policy of "ungovernability" and international labour solidarity, brought the country to a standstill and the government to the negotiating table. The cultural aspects of the labour movement and, in particular, its poets, played a significant role in the "process of cultural reclamation so central to South Africa's transformation and identity politics" (Mashige 2005, 21).

This chapter begins with a brief overview and cursory discussion of the political history of South Africa from the establishment of apartheid in 1948 until its conclusion in 1990. It discusses the structural conditions prevalent in South Africa and the Eastern Cape during the latter half of the twentieth century as well the labour movement that arose in

response to these. From setting the scene within which the labour movement and worker culture unfolded, I move into an analysis of the work of Alfred Qabula and, to a lesser extent, Nise Malange, both of whom became prominent cultural, political, and environmental figures within the South African labour movement through their writing, performances, and cultural activism. By placing their work within the broader political ecology of late apartheid, I show that what were ostensibly purely political texts produced by these poets and their colleagues in the workers' cultural movement in fact responded to environmental conditions as well. They speak directly to the cultural politics of the extraction, dispossession, and accumulation that underpinned South African industrialization, revealing a complex environmentalism in which "the migrant worker was a free peasant transported to an urban industrial setting" who responded to both realms (Mamdani 1996, 219). In resisting racist processes of extraction and labour exploitation in apartheid South Africa, I argue that worker poets—like Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, S.E.K. Mqhayi, and David Yali-Manisi before them—recognized and articulated the presence of constitutive ties between capital and labour, landscape and dispossession. Most importantly, I show that through the skillful use of language and metaphor as well as the adaptation and deployment of traditional forms, the worker poets created oral texts with tremendous historical, cultural and emotional resonance. It is the fine details of these texts that emerge through close readings such as those included in these chapters that give the art its particularly affective power; a power that, in turn, built the strength, voice and unity of silenced and marginalized South African workers and their movement of mass resistance against the slow violence of race-based extraction in apartheid South Africa.

The institution of apartheid

In the wake of the 1948 election, Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd and his newly-elected Nationalist Party government began implementing the apartheid policy on which their election campaign had been based. In particular, they developed a series of increasingly stringent policies to advance their agenda of complete and compulsory race-based, residential segregation. The Group Areas Act, which responded to the ongoing influx of rural Blacks into urban areas, commenced in July 1950 (Fairweather 2006). In laying out the specifications of where various racial populations could legally live, work, and own property, the Act established Black and coloured township areas, leading to massive relocations from other parts of the urban landscape (International Defense and Aid Fund 1969). A decade later, with racially-ordered urban geographies increasingly entrenched, the 1959 Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act expanded apartheid policies into the countryside, strengthening uneven rural geographies and the system of labour migration that had come to define South African society since the turn of the century.

The Bantu Self-Government Act established a pseudo-national “homeland” for each of eight different ethnic groups: North Sotho, South Sotho, Swazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu (Hill 1964, 13). The resultant ten “homeland” areas or “Bantustans” comprised about 276 separate territories, of which only the Transkei approached anything resembling a large, contiguous land base (International Defense and Aid Fund 1969). Nevertheless, these regions were to be governed independently of White intervention, gradually transitioning to the status of independent nation-states as their resident populations became more politically involved. Like the earlier land reserves they developed from, Bantustans were located in the least developed parts of the country: remote areas unsuitable for agriculture and with no access to ports, no mineral rights, and no industry (Biko 2004,

91). With homeland designations drawn on ethnic bases, the Bantu Self-Government Act successfully deepened a simmering level of intertribal conflict that assisted the Act's divide and rule approach (Biko 2004, 91). As Christopher Hill explains, "Ethnic divisions, it is said, are so fundamental and deeply felt that they could not possibly be overcome to allow all groups to combine in a single political entity, nor (though this is not stated so freely) would such unity be desirable for White security" (1964, 2).

With the establishment of the homeland areas, deportations intensified from urban areas and "black spots" scattered throughout the country. Who was deported and who was granted access to urban areas and industrial workplaces was determined according to the logic of racist capitalism, in which

Those ousted from the urban areas are declared unproductive, i.e., for one reason or another they are unable to put their labour at the service of the whites. Most of them are children. The rest are old men and women, widows, the chronic sick, the infirm, the unemployed and the unemployable, and some who have been declared "undesirable".

(International Defense and Aid Fund 1969)

These deportations continued for nearly three decades, uprooting an estimated 3.5 million people by the mid-1980s (Mamdani 1996, 102, Platzky and Walker 1985). By 1990, the Bantustans, which accounted for only 14 per cent of the South African land base, were home to half of its Black population (Mamdani 1996, 102). Not only were these reserves too small to permit more than a handful of families to make their living there as independent farmers, but there was also no room to allow for population growth (Fairweather 2006). This population density proved disastrous for the inhabitants of the reserves, who faced a growing crisis of poverty and malnutrition as the densely populated agricultural lands

became increasingly eroded, overgrazed, and unproductive (Fairweather 2006, Mbeki 1964). These factors, combined with the outmigration of labour, gutted the productive capacity of reserve lands and they remained neglected zones of reproductive labour, an externalized source of the labouring bodies necessary to sustain South Africa's rapidly industrializing economy (Beinart, Delius, and Trapido 1986, Mbeki 1964). Mbeki writes:

From the outset, the purpose of maintaining the reserves was to provide a source of cheap labour for White agriculture, mining and industry. On the one hand the reserves have served as mating camps for the production of migrant labourers, while on the other they have proved suitable dumping grounds for the physical wrecks whom industry discards in the same way as waste fibre is thrown away after its juice has been extracted. (1964, 67)

The Bantu Self-Government Act pushed racial segregation to "its logical conclusion, which is complete separation of the races, both territorial and social" (Hill 1964, 1). It succeeded in advancing the interests of "an exclusionary regime of accumulation, barricading the labour surplus to the periphery" (Marais 2001, 22). This geographical segregation was enforced by increasingly draconian pass laws and influx controls that circumscribed the movements of Blacks between and within regions. They prevented dispossessed and impoverished people from relocating to urban areas, and enforced the separation of families across vast distances. Administration of the pass laws required constant checking and monitoring, a particular source of humiliation and anger.

Reserves, relocations, pass laws, and the violent repression of dissent succeeded in geographically separating labouring Black South Africans from the White owners of the means of production and maintaining a migrant labour system that was both the objective

and the consequence of these tactics (Vigne 1969). The state-sponsored program of spatial reorganization undertaken first by the colonial and then the apartheid administration aimed to increase the expanse and intensity of state power through a process of accumulation by dispossession that intensified “the uneven geographical conditions under which capital accumulation occurs” and exploited “the ‘asymmetries’ that inevitably arise out of spatial exchange relations” (Harvey 2003, 31). These asymmetries only grew more pronounced as the twentieth century advanced. Together, South Africa’s practices of racial segregation and economic polarization, enforced by systematic terror and violence, produced unprecedented economic growth. As in other contexts, an unequal distribution of benefits and increased economic polarization were inevitable outcomes of capital expansion and its associated processes of accumulation and dispossession (Biel 2000, Smith 2008). Meanwhile, the geography of apartheid effectively veiled the social and environmental consequences of economic growth, sequestering them in reserves and relocation sites often at a distant remove from national roads and ascribing their effects to the inferior social and cultural conditions of the subjugated race.

Clearly, the underdevelopment endemic to Qabula’s homeland and the rest of the South African countryside was not the result of some “original condition of backwardness crying out for modernization”, but was instead “an inflicted condition, the legacy of a very modern external plunder by far-off forces” (Nixon 2011, 165). Maintained through South Africa’s policies of racial segregation and separate development, enforced by systematic terror and violence, this underdevelopment was the underbelly of unprecedented economic growth. As consumer prices rose and the ranks of the disenfranchised and unemployed grew, resistance became explosive. In 1960, revolts broke out in the rural Mpondoland territory in the northern Transkei. The same year, the Pan-African Congress orchestrated

pass law protests that culminated in the infamous Sharpeville massacre. During this tragedy, 69 people were killed and another 180 wounded when apartheid police fired over one thousand rounds of ammunition into a crowd of people who had gathered peacefully to protest repressive pass laws (Dubow 2014, Mager and Mulaudzi 2011).

The police crackdowns that followed on the heels of these protests were vicious enough to impose an artificial peace that, over the decade to follow, swelled investor confidence and bolstered economic growth (Mamdani 1996, 29). Globally, only Japan shared the six per cent average annual growth rate that South Africa sustained throughout the 1960s (Mamdani 1996). By the mid-twentieth century, South Africa supplied seventy per cent of the world's gold and its manufacturing sector was expanding by nearly twelve per cent each year (Marais 2001). Yet far from mitigating the country's staggering economic inequalities, this growth merely deepened economic and racial polarizations and South Africa's geographies of injustice, doing little to set the country on stable economic footings. Extraction and export of primary commodities would remain the principal source of foreign exchange for decades, accounting for the bulk of foreign exchange earnings leading up to the country's transition to democracy (Bond 2000). Unlike industrializing Asian countries that structured their economies around the mass-production and export of non-durable, labour-intensive consumer goods, South Africa did not find a way to absorb the willing labourers from either impoverished rural areas or the urban periphery (Marais 2001). On the contrary, the increasing mechanization of its industrial sectors produced diminishing labour requirements that swelled the ranks of the unemployed who had no land base to sustain them.

The apartheid state failed to advance beyond its racially-structured post-war accumulation model of import substitution and mineral exports, a model reliant on both

cheap labour and stable mineral prices (Marais 2001). The deeply uneven racial order of South African society further restricted markets to a small, White consumer base that was ultimately unable to sustain ongoing production growth, particularly given that it was largely restricted to small domestic markets (Marais 2001, Bond 2000). Harvey describes Marx's views on capitalism's tendency to produce falling profit rates and crises of overaccumulation, "typically registered as surpluses of capital (in commodity, money, or productive capacity forms) and surpluses of labour power side by side, without there apparently being any means to bring them together" (Harvey 2003, 88). He goes on to explain that the effect of such crises is "to devalue and in some cases even destroy the surpluses of capital and to reduce the surpluses of labour power to a miserable state" (Harvey 2003, 88). The theory helps explain the inevitable, impossible economic state that ensued in South Africa as inflation pushed up the prices of consumer goods even as it increased the need for cheaper inputs. As Harvey explains, the provision of cheap inputs is "just as important as access to widening markets in keeping profitable opportunities open" (2003, 139). Yet as liberal theorists predicted, the economic contradictions of apartheid were ultimately self-defeating as inevitable and unbearable economic conditions joined intolerable social injustice in pushing the South African proletariat towards armed insurgency, strikes, ungovernability and, ultimately, a troubled democracy.

The Durban strikes and the New Left

Expansion of the industrial sector during the 1960s and 70s was most pronounced in Durban and its peri-urban fringes. There, an influx of foreign capital quickly led to structural transformations of the workplace that occasioned a corresponding expansion of skilled labour and of the urban, industrial working class (Mamdani 1996, 231). Throughout the

1980s, Greater Durban experienced “an annual flow of rural refugees estimated at one hundred thousand” (Mamdani 1996, 275). In particular, a massive influx of amaMpondo workers from Qabula’s homeland swelled the populations of Durban’s hostels and shack settlements (Sitas 2012, 166). By the end of the 1970s, this new cadre of workers, many of whom sought the means to rebuild homesteads destroyed by the government reprisals in the wake of the Mpondo revolts, made up more than a third of Durban’s 650,000 workers (Sitas 2012, 166). Among the other consequences of these adjustments was the intensification of competition for jobs and resources between the settled or permanent sections of the Black urban working class and migrant workers. This would fuel animosities between these layers and lead to open, violent conflict in the years ahead. (Marais 2001, 43)

An increasingly educated, politically astute, and organized workforce concentrated in urban areas had profound implications, beginning with the 1972 strike wave that started in Durban and quickly spread throughout Natal and on to industrial centres nationwide (Mamdani 1996, 234). The strike was the largest since 1946, when the efforts of an earlier generation of union activists had been brutally suppressed. It began in Durban’s Coronation Brick Factory and rapidly spread to other factories across the city until it involved over 60,000 workers in nearly 150 different plants (Beinart 2001, Lodge 2011). Black trade unions had been outlawed throughout most of the twentieth century, but in 1979, unable to stem a rising tide of resistance and aware of the value of unions in improving lines of communication between workers and companies, the state enacted new legislation legalizing them, leading workers to join by the thousand. The year 1979 also saw the publication of the Riekert Report, which reinforced the territorial segregation of rural and urban South Africans with the aim of quelling the demands of the masses. The Report spoke directly to

South Africa's migrant labour system, which remained a defining geographical and social feature of mid-twentieth century South Africa.

The structural changes of the era opened new roles for literature and oral poetry as the ideological resistance and psychological liberation sparked by the Black Consciousness movement helped to move literature out of traditional spaces of the chief and king's court and into the realm of organized urban protest. The Durban strikes ushered in a new era of working class cultural production that included the formation of the Durban Workers Cultural Local in 1983. Unlike labour activism in capitalist countries of the global north, the union movement in South Africa was primarily "a poor people's movement" that "relied on a grassroots form of democracy and accountability" (O'Brien 2001, 177). In Durban, the movement took the form of a proliferation of cultural activities: oral literature, plays, dance, poetry and writing all "thrown into the melting pot to create a robust cultural contribution" (O'Brien 2001, 177). At a time of political transformation, these artists offered a first-hand representation of working class experience, providing a voice for ordinary labourers and consolidating a sense of ownership and participation in trade unions and labour activism. With artists hailing from both rural and urban areas, speaking from the perspective of urban dweller and migrant counterpart, the movement tackled grievances and misunderstandings, helping to heal the cultural rifts imposed by the superstructure of racist capitalism.

In particular, izibongo increasingly became a form of resistance and social solidarity in the labour movements that grew into the driving opposition to apartheid (Brown 1998, Gunner 1999). Performed during union meetings and community gatherings, these poems articulated the everyday struggles of Black labourers, providing a voice for ordinary workers and consolidating a sense of ownership and participation in trade unions. Their literature demonstrated how traditional cultural and political features and functions of oral poetry

translated easily into a form of union activism, worker education, and apartheid resistance. The izibongo form drew on a longstanding association between poetry and conflict in which “the most outstanding and beautiful of the traditional praises” were dedicated to arousing emotions and “inspiring warriors to acts of bravery” (Finnegan 1976, 17, Opland 1998). Like iimbongi of the past, their work generated enthusiasm and courage by empowering and exhorting “people to be what they ‘are’, or—in a very literal sense—what they have it in them to be” (Furniss and Gunner 1995, 227). As Nise Malange puts it,

Praise singing, it really makes people feel like we are in, we are going, because it raised that kind of solidarity and understanding, and I think the biggest thing is solidarity, that we’re together with you. You know, if you’re praise singing is about us going into war, people will follow you and go and fight with you and that’s what praise singing was all about. (Malange 2016)

An awareness of the emotional power of poetry drove Qabula towards izibongo as a means of expressing the struggles and grievances shared by masses of workers. During his long, solitary shifts as a forklift driver, he passed the time composing songs that he later performed for audiences of thousands. In his own words,

Poetry is the most powerful medium of expression in the cultural sphere for me today. [...] [It] tells about the sufferings and pleasures, the life experiences and future plans. I get inspiration from observing other people’s experiences and my own direct experiences. My poetry has to preserve the history of the life of workers. Traditional oral poets tell the story of the king’s virtues and wrong doings. From the poetry kings also learn to critique their own actions. My poetry is different.

The history of workers is what my poetry is about, so that their experiences may be shared by our fellow comrades. (Mahaye 1990, 1-4)

While trade union culture drew on the izibongo tradition, it adapted the familiar form to fit new political and cultural circumstances. In the changing cultural landscape of the late twentieth century workplace, subject matter shifted to emphasize the urban rather than the rural experience and from traditional hereditary leadership to contemporary political leaders (Kaschula 2002). The revival of traditional forms was a powerful mode of voicing a shared experience of and resistance to structures of exploitation and repression. Yet much more than a culture of resistance, the worker poets and their colleagues created a culture of learning, sharing, and mutual support. Despite the rising numbers of Black workers who read daily newspapers, owned radios and worked at professional jobs (Lodge 2011), the circulation of information among labourers was stymied by illiteracy—or at least a reluctance to engage with print materials (Malange 2016). Nise Malange emphasizes that workers' poetry and the workers' cultural movement played a role that extended far beyond mere resistance:

Because the whole thing with resistance poetry is to pass the message.

It was not just for performance, it was to pass on the message. So the workers' praise singers or the workers' cultural movement in Durban was established basically as part of popular education. It wasn't just to resist. It was also to educate the workers at the shop floor because remember those days the rate of illiteracy was very very high and workers were not recognized, the trade unions were not recognized by employers. So [although] there were a lot of materials coming out in print form, there was little education happening on the shop floor.

Those izibongo and poetry and theatre basically played a role in popular education. People always look at resistance but it was not, because you can't resist without knowledge. That's what we believed in. That the workers need to know what they are fighting for. [...] And that was the power of popular education, whether through praise singing, whether through plays that we were doing. The focus was for people to be educated before they take arms. And I'm very proud of that, because most of those people [...] can articulate the struggle. It's people that, even now, when they talk, they talk from knowledge.

(Malange 2016)

Hope is a black forest

Much has been written about Alfred Qabula and the works he produced, particularly during the seventies and eighties as he became a visible cultural force (e.g., Mashige 2001, 2005, Brown 1999, Kaschula 2002, Sitas 1989a). A high profile and widely anthologized poet, his writings and performances helped define the labour movement's aesthetic as well as popular understandings of it (Sitas 2012). In the wake of the Durban strikes, he wrote and produced "The Dunlop Play", which critics have identified as "one of the first attempts to awaken worker consciousness" (Kaschula 1991b, 145). In a stroke of inspiration, he placed a performance by an imbongi within the play and wrote his first isibongo for the character. Following this success, Qabula moved into active production and performance in the genre. As the new union legislation of 1979 opened the floodgates of the union movement, Qabula adopted the isibongo form to applaud the cooperation and leadership of labourers and unions. His poems, performed for crowds of several thousand, brought "mass audiences

excitedly again and again to their feet in full-throated response” (O'Brien 2001, 190), adding to the shifting consciousness of the proletariat and lending strength to the movement.

Born in 1942 to a migrant labourer and a subsistence farmer in Mpondoland, the northern region of what would later become the Transkei Bantustan, Qabula personified the migrant labourer experience. In his autobiography, *A Working Life: Cruel Beyond Belief* (1989), Qabula explains ways in which the system was imposed upon and affected his family.

Then came capitalists demanding labour for the mines and tax collectors wanting cash. My father's father refused to work on the mines and became a transport rider to raise cash to pay his taxes: with his ox-wagon he footed the countryside from farm to farm, from the Transkei to Natal, from the Orange Free State to the Cape and back, carrying grain and other products. But he was destroyed by the arrival of the railways. He became a herbalist and consistently refused to go out and work for a wage. He sent my father and his brothers out to work on the mines or in the sugar fields. From then on migrancy invaded our homes. (Qabula 1989)

Cruelly low wages prevented migrant workers from earning enough either to break the cycle of dependency or to provide adequately for families at home; instead they remained uprooted and estranged from their communities as they oscillated between reserve and workplace. The pattern was devastating to family life. As Qabula recounts:

My father was a miner at Egoli [Johannesburg]. He worked underground, as a machine-handler. He was a very strict man, had a short temper and loved his drink. Like many other men, he would cough out to his family the same bad treatment he received at work and

on the streets of South Africa.... That is how they used to be: he used to explode on us and hold us responsible for his harsh life, of which we knew nothing. (Qabula 1989, 13-18)

Instead, Qabula's family, like many others, knew poverty, dislocation, hunger, and violence. Growing up in the destitution of the Transkei, he betrays the trauma of a continual state of near starvation through repeated references to food, anecdotes in which he steals eggs and potatoes and learns to survive on foods gathered from the forest. He confesses, "You move through your childhood years feeling constantly hungry, so you move like a locust" (Qabula 1989, 25).

As an adult, Qabula reproduced the role of migrant labourer, living in perpetual migration between rural and urban spaces along with hundreds of thousands of his contemporaries. Their collective movement blurred the boundaries and mingled the consciousness of the two realms. Thus, although the labour movement of the 1970s and 80s was primarily urban, driven by a workforce living in concentrated urban and peri-urban areas, rural sensibilities remained a key aspect of the cultural and environmental significance of both the movement and its literature. With the constant movement of workers, elements of urban and rural, traditional and industrial merged into a unified sociocultural landscape. The rural, its traditions, and its natural environments remained present and relevant to the urban movement, informing its metaphors and cultural understandings.

Qabula's urban poetry is infused with images of his homeland, "a harsh and beautiful land – a land of unending green hills and valleys but also a land of poverty, of broken homesteads, of disease and malnutrition" (Qabula 1989). "Praise Poem to FOSATU," for example, speaks to the general experience of Black working life as well as to the particular experience of Mpondo migrant workers. With the lines "Escape into that forest..." and

“Deep in the forest they hid themselves...,” Qabula describes the forests that provided cover for the amaMpondo resistance of 1960, striking a strong emotional chord with the sizeable Mpondo faction of his audiences (Sitas 2012). Yet in his explanation of the emotional resonance of forests in his autobiography, it is clear that while referencing a particular amaMpondo experience of forests, Qabula also draws on broader experiences shared with other migrant workers with rural ties.

But there in my head: those forests... They still lingered on in my memory – the only refuge from my father’s beatings, my hunting ground which used to provide me with all kinds of prey, before I was turned into prey for others, the hunted. [...] The forest was its own universe full of wild fruit and dangers: mambas and crawling creatures of all kinds. Always a source of refuge for the homeless and the frightened, I remembered how during the Mpondo resistance it housed the Congress fugitives. It hid away teachers and commoners, it covered their tracks...It was a retreat from the wilderness of the world outside: the world of beatings and torture and interrogations; the so-called normal world marked with murderous lists of names. [...] When MAWU got re-entry at Dunlop I knew the march through the forests had restarted. (Qabula 1989, 69)

The forest to which Qabula refers is common throughout the Transkei region. Known to Anglophone botanists as Albany Thicket and to British colonialists as Fish River Bush, it is a “relatively impenetrable, woody, semi-succulent, thorny vegetation of an average height of 2-3 metres” (Dold and Cocks 2012, 11). Impenetrability is a particularly salient

feature of Albany Thicket that contributes to its cultural significance to isiXhosa-speaking peoples. As botanist Charles Bunbury noted in 1838,

Hill and dale alike are covered with impenetrable thickets as dense as the undergrowth of a Brazilian forest and much more thorny. I never saw, in any other part of the world, anything resembling the Fish River Bush; nor, I should think, does there exist a tract so difficult to penetrate or to clear. The vegetation is so succulent that fire has no effect on it even in the driest weather, and at the same time so strong and rigid, and so excessively dense, that there is no getting through it without cutting your way at every step, unless in the paths made by wild beasts. Yet the [amaXhosa] make their way through with wonderful skill and activity. (qtd in Dold and Cocks 2012, 12)

The bush, impenetrable and impervious to fire, provided a secure source of cover for amaXhosa resistance throughout colonial times, notably during the War of Mlanjeni (1850-53) when British troops attempted unsuccessfully to flush out amaXhosa warriors by burning the brush (Dold and Cocks 2012, 12). During the Mpondo revolts, it provided important cover for resistance fighters and people fleeing the violence of police reprisals (Qabula, 1989). The forest also offers a spiritual refuge for amaXhosa and amaMpondo peoples: inhabited by ancestral spirits, forests are a source of pride, comfort, and protection that is both physical and spiritual, revealed in such common expressions as *uThixo uliblati lam*, “God is my forest” (Dold and Cocks 2012). Referring both to forests and to mother hens, Qabula highlights the guardianship quality of the trade unions and their function as *iblati lokuzimela*, “forest of hiding,” a term of great pride and respect for mothers who act as protectors and providers for their families (Dold and Cocks 2012, 15). Thus, in a context

characterized by ties between migrant urban workers and the environments of their rural homelands, the forest of Qabula's poems is a powerful layered metaphor. The poem provides a clear example of the ways in which common ecological understandings and the deep emotions aroused by invoking rural environments added to cultural understandings and the political power of the urban resistance.

Yet Qabula's audience was also a fractured, multi-ethnic collection of migrant and urban labourers from throughout South Africa and beyond. In his poem "Africa," first performed for the opening of the Clairwood Trade Union and Cultural Centre in October 1985, Qabula directs his lines to the various kingdoms and tribes of his audience that would find unity and commonality in "Africa" whereas the ethnically-specific genealogical content more typical of traditional imbongi would be isolating and potentially divisive. The poem is a long ode to the natural splendour of the continent as a whole in which Qabula alternately praises the beauty of the landscape, thanks the Creator, and acknowledges the ways in which he has been shaped and strengthened by both. In the final third of the poem, the tone shifts to condemnation, not only of those who would defile this beauty but also of the people of the landscape who are failing to step forward to protect it.

From inside you treasures are taken
From your face, fruit, food and water.
Africa of peace – you are beautiful
But, in your face now
We see the railway tracks
The highways, the buildings, and factories
The structures ...
They fought battles scrambling over you

We hear
The trains, the motor cars and machinery
The bombs going off, the sound of gunshot
[...]

Youth –
Echo the sounds, the songs
And dances
Of the plants, the birds, the bees
And animals
You can make Africa flourish in its pride
Sing, praise and thank the lord
For moulding us and placing us
in Africa

(Qabula, Hlatshwayo, and Malange 1986, 21)

Here, violence is explicitly linked to the exploitation of landscape: industrialization and the plunder of natural beauty go hand in hand with gunshots and bombs. Meanwhile, the invocations of both beauty and responsibility call on the listener “to see her/himself suddenly in one, and then another, and still another circle of identity, obligation and belonging so that something of the potential of the community can be communicated and affirmed” (Neser 2011, 14). Qabula calls on his audience to find the courage to face the weapons of their oppressors through love of homeland and its beauty that it is their responsibility to safeguard.

Qabula's performances also drew power from the shared experience of migrancy itself. The beseeching, elegiac tone of "The Migrant Workers Lament" conveys the hurt associated with both the worker's alienation and the economic reality that produced it.

If I have wronged you Lord forgive me

All my cattle were dead

My goats and sheep were dead

[...]

I left my wife and children

To look for work alone

(Qabula, Hlatshwayo, and Malange 1986, 15)

Here again, Qabula strikes emotional chords at multiple levels. While capturing a common migrant experience, he directly acknowledges that for amaMpondo and others, "cattle, sheep and goats were really dead [...] there was nothing metaphoric about the content to start with" (Sitas 2012, 171). The passage also strongly evokes "yet another ugly face of the apartheid reality where the black family is rent asunder because the political environment does not allow for its continued normal existence" (Mashige 2005, 23). In these lines, the exclusion of rural women and families from the urban realm and the necessary separation of worker and family is clearly a source of grief and regret. Thus, the cultural production of the labour movement not only gave workers a platform to express their grievances and struggles, but also offered an opportunity to heal rifts between industrial and traditional society.

Just as Malange describes, Qabula's poetry performs a vital educational and unifying function. For the sizeable urban amaZulu contingent of his audience, who hailed from

Durban and viewed the influx of amaMpondo and amaXhosa workers with suspicion, it helped sensitize these comrades to the particular challenges the migrants faced. With the lines “I didn’t have a ‘Special,’” he draws attention to the “Special” pass that rural labourers required in order to apply for work outside of their homeland reserve. It reminds his listeners of the government’s policy of enforced segregation and divide and conquer approaches that drew artificial lines between rural and urban territories, but also between people and ethnicities where the territories overlapped. Nise Malange points out that the matter was not only migration from rural to urban, but also migration between urban areas: “As people that were coming from the Cape we needed to get a ‘Special.’” So for people here, because they didn’t have to do that, you have to educate them about some of these problems” (Malange 2016).

In a similar vein, Qabula describes the process of mounting a stage play to communicate the experience of workers: “We performed this play to make our wives and children aware of the conditions of the workplace and the disrespectful way in which we were treated. They had the impression that we were well-treated at work, well fed and earned a lot of money which we spent on girl friends” (1989, 83). Clearly, the familial divisions produced by the migrant labour system imposed an almost unbearable level of interpersonal suspicion and strife, giving the cultural movement an important healing function. “The Migrants Lament” reveals the effects of an industrial system in which the family unit and even the body itself had rapidly shifted from being part of the natural environment in which it was embedded to becoming “a site of political-economic contestation” that acted as a disciplined “appendage of capital in both the workplace and the consumption sphere” (Harvey 1998, 401, 404).

Capital's tendency to violate and damage "the integrity of the labouring body" and to do so "on an uneven geographical basis" (Harvey 1998) was a palpable reality for Qabula. Describing the Dunlop tire factory in his autobiography, he rails: "That place is hell: all the workers there are pitch-black from the black dust and powder that pollutes the place. I was pained by the way people were exposed to such harmful powders" (Qabula 1989, 67). In another passage, he berates the company for its callous treatment of a colleague "liked for his dedication to Dunlop" who became less productive in his old age and was eventually fired: "From that time onwards I hated the Dunlop factory. It used people very hard and then, when they had no strength to produce more, dumped them like rubbish. I realised that I would eventually be in the same position as Mr. Makhathini" (Qabula 1989, 78).

Labouring in an industrial system organized around a deeply entrenched colour bar, Qabula's literary work exhibits a keen awareness of the tight interrelationships between exploitation, environmental injustice, and human derogation imposed by apartheid capitalism. As an environmental writer, the subjugation of bodies and families as well as their landscapes and communities lies at the heart of his environmentalism. Thus, like other African environmental writers, Qabula's work tackles "lived environments, the social implications of environmental change, and the relationships between representations of nature and power" (Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 13).

The role of izibongo in political activism and democracy is evidenced by its prominent role in anti-apartheid struggles, as well as in its active suppression. Under apartheid, the political threat that the imbongi represented led to silencing and censorship in a variety of forms. The change in socio-political circumstances "tended to blunt the imbongi's outspoken criticism," limiting the imbongi's poetic voice, imposing on their responsibility to act as social critic, and making it impossible to exercise their traditional role

(Opland 1998, 276-281). In the political climate that followed the establishment of the Bantu Homeland Act in 1976, the imbongi “found himself trapped between the power wielded by homeland politicians and the force of public opinion ranged against them” (Opland 1998, 281). Despite this active repression, traditional and popular culture provided an expressive outlet that faced less censorship than other media (e.g., Kromberg 1994).

It was in this spirit that Qabula embraced both his vocation as resistance poet and its inherent dangers. As he rose in prominence, friends and family members began to receive unwelcome visitors “looking for that poet: me.... From then there were many more visits, which made me decide to leave home. I have been uprooted since then” (Qabula 1989, 109). As part of a persecuted class of artists and intellectuals, he joined other prominent African writers who saw themselves as witnesses, “part of that testimonial tradition” that operated with the certainty that “writing can make things happen” (Nixon 2011, 104). Voicing this sentiment, Qabula states, “Poetry is more powerful than other forms of media like newspapers. If poetry was not so important Mzwakhe Mbuli’s works would not have been banned. Poetry is straight and to the point. It stabs the heart of the enemy whilst it articulates precisely the experiences of [the] worker....” (Qabula and Mahaye 1990, 4)

Perhaps it was the experience of persecution that led Qabula back to the forests of his mind in a later poem. “The Black Forest of Africa” returns to the rich symbolism of the Transkeian forests that have now become darker, threatening. No longer a place of safety, they shelter not only the persecuted but also the enemy.

We never take it seriously,
Not knowing it’s the centre of all nature,
Security, happiness, all these are there,
Life, death, suffering, all are there.

In times of war, the forest,
In times of sickness, the forest,
In times of happiness, the forest,
Honey, fruits,... there is no hunger in the forest,
Cold water, deep in the forest,
Even enemies like it,
They say: “we will wait for dusk,
We will enter without being seen,
We will kill them and no one will know
Who killed them.”
(Evill and Kromberg 1988, 6)

Politics of language and form

As the renown of the worker poets spread, demand grew for back issues of worker newspapers in which their poems had been published (Van Dyk and Brown 1989). Seeing an opportunity to reach a broader audience, the Cultural Workers' Local decided in 1984 to publish a collection of the poems (Van Dyk and Brown 1989). *Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle* is a slender, seventy-five-page volume featuring brief biographies of its three contributors and a selection of their poetry. The book is written entirely in English; the original isiZulu poems were published separately in an effort to make the publication affordable for working class readers (Van Dyk and Brown 1989). Reading the text, it is clear that much of the impact and vitality of the performances is lost not only through the transcription and translation of the poems themselves, but also in exporting the

poetry from its urgent cultural and political setting via the two-dimensional medium of the printed word. Presented in unsophisticated English with formal elements often working against the content, it is understandable that the poems drew criticism. Despite the praise that *Black Mamba* garnered, a number of critics argued that the poetry was mere sloganeering, conceptually shallow and linguistically unsophisticated. A fierce debate broke out among intellectuals (invariably either White or Indian) regarding the literary value of the work. For example, Brenda Cooper criticizes the poetry for its “one-dimensional triumphalism,” claiming that

The achievements of the collection are uneven, and much of the poetry is flawed by the lack of a sustained and rigorous poetic language. All too often a gauche statement in flat prose stands for poetry, only poetic in that it is written in short lines and verse form. This is unfortunately a difficulty often experienced with so-called political poetry, where there is at times an overemphasis on content at the expense of the quality of the poetry. (Cooper 1992)

Lionel Abrahams rejects Jeremy Cronin’s “patronizingly high praise” of “passages of very minor achievement” (see Cronin 1987), arguing that the uncritical acclaim does Black artists more harm than good (Abrahams and Asvat 1987). Nadine Gordimer offers the patronizing and surprisingly ill-informed view that

For over three hundred years, not only were they [i.e., Blacks] excluded from any role in defining cultural norms; it was denied that they had any need of these let alone anything to contribute. If they could read, there were virtually no common references, no givens, between them and white writers, and few between them and black writers, the latter

already upwardly alienated by education and the white-collar style of life it has implied. Now, beyond the opportunities to acquire knowledge of modern science, technology and administration, there is asserted the masses' right to enjoy the self-realization of literature.

(Gordimer 1990, 96)

Her stance blithely ignores the fact that “the masses” had produced a sophisticated literature, ignored by White audiences, since language was invented. Farouk Asvat displays his obvious irritation at the eagerness of some White intellectuals to heap praise on the worker poets, complaining about “The usual perpetuation of the great white myth that whatever originates from the masses in this country is of no significance unless it gets the authoritative stamp from whites” (Abrahams and Asvat 1987). He goes on to cite important yet uncelebrated Black writers of the 1960s and 70s who faced persecution, censorship, and even, in the case of Nkutsweu Matsau, criminal conviction for practicing their art (Abrahams and Asvat 1987). From Asvat's perspective, the major novelty of worker poetry is the excitement and attention it has aroused among White audiences, which he claims is misguided based on the simplistic, sloganeering nature of the poetry.

Each of these criticisms derives from a certain set of literary, political and cultural understandings of the context in which worker poetry was produced, yet all betray a lack of understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of the work. Ari Sitas, editor of *Black Mamba* and perhaps the commentator most closely tied to the politics and production of worker poetry, is more circumspect in both his criticism and praise. He is also clearly much more cognizant of the complexities of performed verse:

One notes that oral performances are impressive in their magniloquence and communal wisdom whether they are lengthy

narratives or short proverbs. These performances furthermore use words as sounds, or better, events of sound imbued with power. At the same time, a word in such performances may set off a chain of associations which the performer will follow into a cul-de-sac unless skilled in his craft. [...] The problem is, in my view, that Qabula's performances resemble the tradition of oral poetry but are informed by a broader set of cultural experiences. One witnesses a form that has undergone dramatic changes. (Sitas 1984)

The African society from which the literature arises is complex and the poetry dense with cultural allusions and a literary aesthetic of which other commentators appear to be relatively unaware. Notwithstanding Sitas's discussion of the relationship between the printed English text and the performed work from which it derived, Brenda Cooper insists

While a great deal may well have been lost in the process of transcription and while the critic should be vigilant in recognizing the speech rhythms in the written lines, *Black Mamba Rising* should be, can only be, judged as it is presented to us – as a volume of written, published poetry. For whatever reasons, the poems were not distributed on cassette tape nor left exclusively in the oral mode. It was felt that they warranted publication in book form and it is this that I am evaluating, though one might evaluate the same poetry in performance. It is necessary to emphasise this because of the extreme differences that have arisen about the assessment of the poetry's worth. The fact of their 'other lives' on the stage should not be allowed to act as the

ultimate compromise, the way out of confronting these differences
squarely. (Cooper 1992, 146)

Like others, Cooper here refuses to engage with the linguistic complexities of the work and she seems to be unaware that the original performances were in isiZulu, not English, and have been not only transcribed but also translated. Thus the speech rhythms in the English lines bear almost no resemblance to the original spoken text. Such demeaning oversights signal that a closer examination of the relationship between performance and print, rhythm, and translation is long overdue.

Qabula in performance is surprising, disarmingly humble on film (n.d.). Tall, slender, and moustached with an enormous set of 1980s-style glasses, he is far from the strident militant I expected. Instead he cuts an almost endearing figure in a black tunic trimmed with a fringe of colourful rags, a striped tie to symbolize capitalist overlords and white trousers torn into fringes to the knees representing the impoverished state of workers. He displays none of the hard-hitting self-assurance I've come to expect with iimbongi performing in the more traditional style; although he shouts, he doesn't break into the imbongi's grating, guttural roar. His words are clearly spoken and his pace balanced, interspersed with pauses; occasionally he appears to be collecting his thoughts. Performing in isiZulu, his second language, it is likely that he speaks with the accent particular to his Mpondoland roots. At one point breaks into laughter along with the crowd as a small child climbs onto the stage to join him and is carried off by a member of the stage crew. Later the boy reappears, gazing out at the audience from Qabula's side to join the latter in performing a shuffling dance to the ululations of the crowd. Qabula's popular appeal is obvious: this is not an awe-inspiring radical but a man of the people.

All of these aspects are lost in the poetry's conversion to print, but much more importantly, the English translations obliterate much of the artistry of the lines. This is clear when a translated text is juxtaposed with the isiZulu transcription as Russell Kaschula does in his doctoral dissertation (1991b). Appendix A includes both a transcription of the FOSATU poem in isiZulu alongside a translation that closely resembles the version in *Black Mamba* with some minor adjustments to the punctuation for clarity.

Qabula's original oral poem clocks in at over two hundred lines (Kaschula 1991b). What appears in *Black Mamba* and subsequent anthologies (e.g., Qabula 1992) is a splinter of the original, pared down presumably to suit a modern English aesthetic and, perhaps, to economize on the labour and cost involved in converting an oral work to a printed one and to minimize the cost of the marketed volume. The juxtaposition of these versions clearly illustrates how much is lost in translation. In the isiZulu version, the lines in the opening stanza are tight and rhythmic, building through regular rhythm and assonant repetition. In this example, the stressed syllables are indicated with \ and the unstressed syllables with ∪.

\ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 Nguye wavela!
 \ ∪ \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 Basho bonke bathi wavela!
 \ ∪ \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ ∪
 Wena hlathi elihambayo laseAfrika.
 ∪ \ ∪ \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪
 Ngifike amawele elilelana
 \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 Kanti ngabasebenzi
 \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 Abasebenza ezimbonini
 \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ \ ∪
 Bexoxelana ngezinkinga
 \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪
 Ezibahlupha ezimbonini
 \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ ∪
 Abazisebenzela eAfrika.

∪ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 It is he who has appeared!
 ∪ \ \ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 They all said that he had appeared!
 \ \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ ∪
 You moving forest of Africa.
 ∪ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 When I arrived the twins were all crying
 \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 These were the workers,
 ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 Industrial workers,
 ∪ \ ∪ ∪ \ ∪
 Discussing the problems
 ∪ ∪ \ ∪ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ ∪
 That affect them in the industries
 ∪ \ \ ∪ \ ∪ ∪
 They work for in Africa.

In the isiXhosa version, not all of the stressed syllables have equal emphasis, however the lines, and opening lines especially, generally have a clear, regular rhythm strongly marked by stressed and unstressed syllables. On the other hand, where the stresses fall in the English lines is debatable. Note the second line in particular that is mainly comprised of six single-syllable words; the stress could fall on almost any of these words resulting in a stammering and uncertain cadence. What this scansion mainly shows, however, is the way in which translation fundamentally alters the speech rhythms in the written lines, transforming the opening line of the original poem from a tidy spondee and iamb in the isiXhosa to a stuttering collection of monosyllables in the English. In the third line, the smooth, alliterative *ls* and open vowels are evocative of the lamentation they describe, effects that are lost entirely in the English. Further down in the poem, the beautifully alliterative iambs of “Bangena kulelhlathi baphuma,” is awkwardly rendered as “Deep in the forest they hid themselves, and then came out.” The distinction between “Sifukamele nathi” and “Sikhukhumeze nathi” is not translated. The translation of the closing stanza breaks clunkily, draining the power from the first lines that could have been translated more literally to read

I watch all

that you do!

Courage FOSATU!

Hail!

Power to the workers!

In this example, the simple monosyllables of the first two anapest lines mirror one another, dropping the emphasis on the long vowels at the line breaks. These syllables lead immediately into the dactyl of the third line, which lends weight to “Courage,” while the effective spondee created by the two stressed syllables of “Hail” and “Power” injects muscle

into all of these words, creating a rousing tone of closure. This example illustrates how choices in the construction and presentation of the translated text profoundly affects readings and interpretations of the literary value of the original work as well as its meaning.

These two poems – isiZulu and English – also clearly demonstrate that a translation and an original work are in essence different texts, with different sounds, rhythms, forms, meanings and emotional registers. Both come weighted with different cultural baggage. If a literary work is a piece of writing in which “*what* is said is taken in terms of *how* it is said” (Eagleton 2013, 3, italics in original), then it is necessary to acknowledge that literary criticism of a printed English translation differs in fundamental ways from literary criticism of an original text, whether printed or performed. Here we run up against yet another of the injustices faced by Black writers: not only must they produce printed English texts in order to reach a larger reading public and a critical audience, but they and their work, if they receive any critical attention at all, must endure the unwitting blunders of a White literati that, with few exceptions, lack the cultural and linguistic background necessary for a well-rounded critical analysis.

Nightshift mothers

Born in Cape Town in 1960, Nise Malange was among the youngest of the labour poets and the most prominent of the few women involved in the workers’ cultural movement. She developed an interest in labour politics from an early age, inspired by her uncle, Reverend Marawu, who had served time on Robben Island for his political activism (KZN Literary Tourism). She became involved in the trade union movement after her arrival in Durban in 1982 and by 1983 was active as a playwright, poet and songwriter with the group that became the COSATU cultural unit (Malange 1988). Throughout much of the 1980s, she

worked seven days a week as a union organizer and was a vocal proponent of workers' rights (Malange 1988).

As an isiXhosa-speaking migrant from the Western Cape, Malange found herself on the outside of urban Black society in Durban. But it is her gender in particular that sets her apart in a labour and cultural movement defined and directed by men. The working class in South Africa has always been oppressed, yet within this class women faced the double burden of wage labour and labour in the home. Largely unable to find work in male-dominated industries, they were confined to poorly remunerated service work that resulted in their social isolation and inability to organize (Marismulu 1998). Many women could only find employment as domestic workers, which often required them to live at the homes of their employers where they were subject to further exploitation. Such living arrangements were “particularly damaging to working class families because most black South African homes are headed by women” (Marismulu 1998, 264). Isolated and without access to union activities, “domestic workers have subsisted in alienation from their labour and from each other” (Marismulu 1998, 264). Malange expresses these frustrations in her poem “Nightshift Mother.”

Left with a double load

At home

My children left uncared

Anxiety

At work

My boss insists we should

Be grateful for the opportunities

He gives women to be exploited.

[...]

And I work wandering on my knees,
Through these deserted and desolate spaces,
The group of us lost in these vast buildings,
Forgotten and neglected
Exploited as you sleep

(Evill and Kromberg 1988, 18-19)

Not only was this cleaning work brutally demeaning (the speaker spends her nights shuffling around her workplace on her knees), it was also physically dangerous. Women who finished their shifts after midnight would often be forced to “battle for somewhere to sleep because it is unsafe to travel home to the townships,” which were, according to apartheid spatial organization, invariably at a significant remove from the White spaces where women worked (Marismulu 1998, 265).

These workplace arrangements may offer a partial explanation for the absence of women in the cultural movement. A further explanation lies in Ingrid de Kok’s forceful statement that “South Africa is so deeply phallogocentric, it seems to me, both in its present capitalistic and racist mode, and in the practices of its progressive opposition, that these dismissals need constant confronting” (qtd in O’Brien 2001, 183). Not only were women marginalized and excluded from unions, they were actively attacked by men as a result of their activist work.¹¹ As Malange explains,

We are all aware that this society is male dominated, with mainly male chauvinists. [...] In Natal, after the women’s forum conference, there were smear pamphlets attacking women. I’m sorry that I don’t have

¹¹ For example the rapes of female student protestors by their male comrades in late 2015 (Mugo 2015).

this pamphlet now. But these pamphlets said they were from workers from the factory floor. Generally it was addressing the issue of women organizing themselves. It said that women are demanding six months maternity leave while they are not even sure that those babies born at the time will be theirs, that they will be the fathers of those babies.

(Malange 1988)

As well as smearing women, the pamphlet in question would seem to reveal much about the distrustful and expedient nature of male-female relationships in Durban at the time. Women's exclusion from union activism and cultural activities and their invisibility in broader public and political commentary had material effects; in major metropolitan regions, "the wages, in cash and kind, of full-time domestic workers fell in real terms (taking 1975 as the base year) by 16 per cent over the period 1973-80" (qtd in Marismulu 1998, 264). Children bore the brunt of women's overwork, low pay, anxiety, and absence from the household, which all left their marks on the generation to follow.

Despite Malange's contributions as a writer and activist, she remains marginal or absent in most critical work about the movements of which she was part. As an example, COSAW, the Congress of South African Writers, a group committed to redressing the imbalances of apartheid, proclaimed its January 1990 issue of *Writers' Notebook* to "Focus on Women." In fact, the issue opened with an eleven-page tribute to Alfred Qabula and his poetry while the "Focus on Women" was limited to a few pages at the back of the issue that includes only a single poem by Malange (Mahaye 1990, O'Brien 2001). This glaring imbalance ignored feminist mobilization and the formation of a Natal Women's Forum within COSAW that "passed a resolution to work towards 50% representation on all

committees and to form a Forum that would focus on encouraging women writers” (O'Brien 2001).

As a woman, Malange belonged to a demographic group more often relegated to rural hinterlands than part of the urban labouring population. Writing from this perspective, Malange’s poetry tackled the intersectionality of apartheid capitalism, making visible the gender impacts of the migrant labour system and calling for the cultural transformation of patriarchy. Malange’s contribution to *Black Mamba* is the third and smallest, allocated only six pages within the collection as compared to the forty-one pages of her two male colleagues. Yet she offers a closing note that is strong and compassionate, her poetry emphasizing the interrelationships between labour and the domestic realm and offering praises to May Day and workers lost to the struggle. In her poem, “I, the Unemployed” she speaks plainly and bluntly of women’s experiences both in paid employment and in unremunerated reproductive labour in the reserves, emphasizing both the social value and economic necessity of paid employment.

I spit at the sun
Shining on me
Blazing everyday
I am waiting for the rain to come
And I cannot plough this beautiful piece of earth.
Here I am: unemployed
I
the unemployed
I am here but invisible.
Preacher man pray for the rain to come.

White collars
in your chrome and brown arm-chairs
Please brighten up this thinning light.
[...]
My kids are dying –
Malnutrition, kwashiorkor
There is nothing growing here
And the animals have died.

(Qabula, Hlatshwayo, and Malange 1986, 59-60)

The poem poignantly depicts the social and environmental conditions of a rural landscape and traditional society pillaged for capital growth elsewhere. Investment in the development of a plantation economy enables the extraction of “a constant flow of wealth which then further accentuates the dominating interrelations” of industrial over preindustrial society (Williams 1975). Despite her urban origins, Malange has an intimate knowledge of the lifeways of these rural settings; as a youth she was sent to the homeland areas to reconnect with her heritage. As she describes in “A Time of Madness,” not only were the rural areas plagued with malnutrition and illness, they also lacked the tranquility of earlier times.

And lightning struck us in 1976
The year where all the madness started.
The madness started for me in the Transkei
Where I was leading a different life in the bundu¹²

¹² i.e., the bush.

Collecting wood and after school tending the land
Feeling superior to the people because I came from CTA¹³
But I enjoyed the milk straight from the cows
And the life among the sheep and goats
And people ploughing fields

I looked forward to this on my arrival but also forward
To a life without policemen
Without thugs and harassment
And I enjoyed collecting cowdung¹⁴
Instead of using cobra floor polish from the shops
And I was delighted to know that I could make my own samp¹⁵
And wandering in the forests to bring wood to light the fires

With violence erupting around her in the Transkei, Malange returned to Cape Town where she was met by further violence. In the second half of the poem, she describes the events and their lasting social effects.

Then Soweto happened
And the madness started
[...]
And whatever they did not destroy the soldiers finished,
And we hurled petrol bombs,
And they sliced with their pangas,

¹³ Cape Town Area.

¹⁴ Used for polishing the floors of mud rondavel houses.

¹⁵ Corn grits.

And there was blood too much blood,
And our parents were being killed coming from work,
Still sweated from the day's toil
That I am trying to banish from my memory,
Only to forget,
Only to remember that the wounds must not open again,
Because they have scarred our minds,
We are mentally ill,
We are the mad generation,
Born in the eruption of madness,
Raised when madness struck.
(Evill and Kromberg 1988, 14-17)

This sense of “madness” would remain with her for the rest of her life. As an activist and counsellor for victims of violence during the upheaval of the 1980s and 90s, Malange is painfully aware of the intergenerational trauma the events inflicted and the need for ongoing healing: “Richmond, you know the massacres that happened in Richmond.¹⁶ If I carry that pain, the people that were affected directly, how do they feel?” (Malange 2016).

Malange’s literary and activist work is deeply engaged with the liberation and the trade movements and with the particular role of women within these movements, their oppression within the patriarchal domains of home, workplace, and social organizations, and their general absence from cultural production. Of the trade movement, she observes “The presence of women has been sporadic, rather than regular and strong. Few women have participated in the creative workshops and performances or in writing poetry” (Malange

¹⁶ Eleven people were shot dead during a vigil for Sifiso Nkabinde, a regional leader within the United Democratic Movement (1999).

1988, 12). The absence of women in performance culture effectively excludes them from a realm that would enable them to “realize their creative potential and extend their self-confidence as participants in the struggle for cultural transformation” (Malange 1988, 12).

Yet despite the oppressively patriarchal culture of 1980s South Africa, Malange, like Nontsizi Mqgqwetho before her, was aware of the opportunities it offered that would not have been available in earlier times:

Traditional culture and the law has played a big role in the oppression of women because for a long time women were regarded as minors who cannot make decisions—even in the absence of their menfolk. In traditional culture women were seen as objects who have to bring up the kids and be ululating whilst the praise poet is praising the Chief or Induna.

Many women will remember the story telling (intsomi) which was told during the night and in the dark. If they told the stories during the day, it was said that they will grow horns. As kids we were made to believe that. (Malange 1990)

In raising her voice, Malange stood up not only against the racist oppressors of the apartheid regime but also against the sexist oppression of her own people and their claims that women’s literature “is not powerful enough, too simple and straightforward etc.” (Malange 1990). Throughout her cultural activism she calls on women to “come together and write about their problems, [and] empower and encourage other women to write and document their stories” (Malange 1990). Through such speech, women could find mutual strength to address and change patriarchal attitudes and end women’s oppression in both apartheid and Black South African society.

Conclusion

In the years following independence, Qabula found himself sidelined then forgotten as the newly liberated country “was taken over by a world of cellphones and briefcases” (Sitas 2003). Retreating to his rural home, he continued to write, his poems now steeped in disillusioned anger (Sitas 2003).

Some of Qabula’s poetry deals a lot with that pain of neglect. You know from COSATU, from the ANC and from the silencing of the voices of the workers. [...] If you look at all the research, the impact of what we did in the 80s, and what the workers did in 1973, and the beneficiaries today, that’s what Qabula was talking about. That we fought, we made a step-ladder. People walk up to get on top and we’re left down there to die, you know. And where are these people that we fought with? Have they forgotten? Remember that you can fall from there, and know that no one is gonna catch you. (Malange 2016)

In 2002, Qabula suffered a stroke and died shortly after. In his tribute, fellow poet and activist Ari Sitas also remarked on Qabula’s withdrawal and sense of betrayal in the years preceding his death.

He was deeply disappointed that revolution was taken over by a world of cellphones and briefcases. As he discovered that his talents as an oral person were lost in the winds of change, these disturbing poems preceded his self-imposed exile. Truly, none of us was spared in these poems. “The Long Road” is a criticism of all of us on our road to wealth and power, climbing over his back with spiked shoes. His “Of Land, Bones and Money” is one of the more profound expressions of

our negotiated settlement – reminding us of the “restless dead” and that “seasons of drought have no rainbows.” (Sitas 2003)

In the years before his death, as the world of engines, industry and noise expanded, Qabula found his own measure of peace in the endless green hills of his homeland.

My ancestors ploughed this land and trailed these hills with cowdung. They did so from way back, as far as the memory reaches in the clan of Miya; in the lines of Muja, of Sibewu, of Manqadanda, of Eluhluwini, of Sijekula, of Siyalankulandela, of Manciba and of Henqwa. For two centuries their praise-names and their cattle echoed around these valleys. (Qabula 1989)

Yet despite this bitterness and regret, Qabula’s later poetry revealed a steadfast faith in God and humanity. If his Transkeian landscape was to be rendered a dumping ground for South Africa’s capitalists, so be it. There was beauty to be found there and, in spite of the poverty and neglect—or perhaps because of it—a prevailing human dignity and kindness.

At the dumping ground
and we do not exploit
we do not cheat profits out of each other
we have slipped through their grip
leaving their cheeks blown-up with anger
and we are growing
We are responding
and someone is calling
He is calling on us
to work hard as daylight is coming

it has been a very long sunset
and a very long night
We are to sleep and listen to the voice in our dreams
do not fear
The one who is beginning to call
is standing beside you
with gifts and with infinite talents
Work on!¹⁷
(Sitas 2003)

¹⁷ Translated from the isiXhosa by Harold Nxasana.

Chapter 5: Versions of silence

There is no simple formula for the relationship of art to justice. But I do know that art—in my own case the art of poetry—means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage.

~ Adrienne Rich

Introduction

In 1990, State President and National Party leader F.W. de Klerk lifted the thirty-year ban on the African National Congress and, as political exiles returned to their homes, Nelson Mandela walked out of a twenty-seven-year imprisonment onto the home stretch to freedom. Four years later, as Mandela took to the podium at his presidential inauguration, an exceptional story of struggle and hope reached its celebratory conclusion. Common people had overturned a brutally unjust social order and instated a democratic government with the power to bring equality, prosperity, and progress to a country that had suffered centuries of oppressive racial violence.

Of course, the story of South Africa doesn't end there. Despite significant gains in the early years of the new administration, twenty-plus years of Black majority rule has not substantially affected the economic landscape of the country. Rather, the net result of several centuries of institutionalized inequality has continued to be, unsurprisingly, geographic and economic asymmetry. Counter to popular anticipations, South Africa has largely failed to transform its mineral wealth and industrial prowess into lasting sources of prosperity and economic security for the majority of its citizens (Elbra 2013). Instead, the country's geography and institutions continue to reflect its long history of systemic segregation and

uneven development under White rule.

In “Praise Poem for FOSATU,” Qabula remarks

But to our dismay,

After we had appointed them, we placed them on the

Top of the mountain,

and they turned against us.

They brought impimpis into our midst to inflict¹⁸

Sufferings upon us.

Some of us, those who were clever, were shot down

To the dust with bullets

(Qabula, Hlatshwayo, and Malange 1986)

While this passage may indeed have described the tumultuous nature of union politics in the early 1980s, it is eerily prophetic of subsequent events. On 16 August 2012, thirty-four people were killed and another eighty or more injured when police opened fire on striking platinum miners and their allies near the town of Marikana (Bruchhausen 2015). The massacre triggered a nation-wide strike wave for the remainder of the year, leading some commentators to call it an historical moment equivalent to the massacres at Sharpeville and Soweto in 1960 and 1976 (Alexander 2013). Although mainstream media coverage of the event promoted a story of the South African police pitted against irrational and violent protesters, alternate narratives emphasize police collaboration with Lonmin and a shift in the role of unions and union leaders from protectors to corrupt and violent oppressors of people peacefully demanding change (Alexander 2013, Bruchhausen 2015, Desai 2014).

Qabula to some extent forewarned of the disillusionment and violence that would

¹⁸ Impimpis: Black police informants

follow independence if the instruments of power merely passed from one set of hands to another without reconfiguring the underlying structures and institutions of capitalism and apartheid. His lines highlight the difficulty of achieving true liberation, as those who find their way into newly unoccupied positions of power quickly adopt the use of force to solidify their position and create a new system of exploitation (Fanon 2001). In the struggle for independence, not only leaders must change, but also the systems, structures and mindsets that granted them political legitimacy.

Qabula is not the only one to raise his voice in concern over the dynamics of South Africa's transition to democracy. Despite a resistance movement that was "bravely militant, resolutely socialist, and waged with the support of progressive nationalists around the world" (Desai 2002, 9), the nascent democratic state was no match for the force of the neoliberal ethos that had come to define the global political economy in the preceding decades. Since then, as crime and corruption have risen and the gulf between a prosperous middle class and an impoverished majority yawns ever wider, hope and celebration have soured into disillusionment and a general sense of betrayal. In this climate of discontent, large scale public protest has become a defining feature of the political landscape, with popular sentiment finding voice in shack uprisings, labour unrest and student protests that question the very meaning of democracy and liberation (Gibson 2012, Hart 2008, Brown 2015). Over the past two decades, civil protests have increasingly come to reflect a widespread and growing recognition that South Africa's liberation is incomplete and that the transition to democracy alone has been insufficient to amend historical imbalances (Desai 2002). Just as in the apartheid era, South Africa's social struggles are ideological as well as political; far beyond contesting material conditions and service provision, contemporary activists call for decolonization of the social and political structures that perpetuate these deficiencies, and of

the language, narratives, and ideologies that prop them up (Gibson 2014).

In the climate of extreme censorship and police brutality that defined apartheid South Africa, poets were a visible and powerful cultural force whose role as freedom fighters garnered them banning orders, police violence, detention, and death threats (e.g., Qabula 1989). Drawing on a traditional practice that was inherently political, poets performing in the *izibongo* style inserted themselves into an ideological struggle against racism and dispossession that had been ongoing since colonial times (Neser 2011). In the late apartheid period and the years shortly after it, scholars emphasized the significance of poets and oral performance to the resistance movement, and in particular the emergence of *iimbongi* from the traditional realm of chiefs and kings into a contemporary scene of trade union rallies, liberation protests, and presidential addresses (Kaschula 1991a, Kaschula and Diop 2000, Van Dyk and Brown 1989, Gunner 1999, Cronin 1988, Mashige 2005). Although it is clear that *iimbongi* have played a valuable role in social and political commentary and the development of South African modernity through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, my research suggests a more nuanced picture of their significance and role in a decolonizing, post-apartheid South Africa.

Political oppressions have continued in the New South Africa, albeit in transmuted forms. Several *iimbongi* I spoke with remarked on a contemporary culture marked by a pervasive climate of political tension and expressed a reluctance to raise their voices on certain topics for fear of reprisals. Instead, their words are circumscribed by the nature of public performance venues, their need to derive an income from their work, and the unwillingness of patrons to endure public criticism, no matter how artful. Ironically, their comments suggested that *iimbongi* have bowed to this sense of oppression even as South Africa as a whole has established itself as a country of vocal protest and mass demonstration,

where, over the past twenty years, courageous bands of shack dwellers, mine workers, and students have raised dissatisfied voices, placing their jobs, relationships, and bodily integrity on the line in the course of resolutely demanding change. Whether iimbongi have also taken a stand in these demonstrations is beyond the scope of my research, but anecdotal evidence suggests that performance art has not been a notable feature of the South African political landscape in recent years. It appears that, despite the absence of formal censorship laws that were so much a part of the apartheid regime, independence has ushered in a new era in which iimbongi no longer function as the fiery political commentators and visible social agitators so celebrated in the past. Indeed, the current circumstances could be seen to cast doubt on both the scholarly claims of their past political import and on the political relevance of the iimbongi in contemporary society.

On the other hand, in the years following independence, the young iimbongi Zolani Mkiva quickly became a widely recognized figurehead of Black strength and identity thanks to high-profile opportunities to perform alongside Nelson Mandela. Mandela's efforts to integrate African customs into democratic society reflected a new constitution that officially recognized the authority of traditional, hereditary leaders and perhaps marked the start of a new ethos that placed African values and concerns first. However, Mandela and leaders since have been inconsistent in their embrace of cultural traditions and ideals, trotting them out to curry political support (e.g., Mandela's strategic deployment of iimbongi and President Jacob Zuma's rhetorical flourishes with regards to traditional gender relations) while failing to provide meaningful financial or political support for the development of African arts and languages. While iimbongi are an important aspect of a broad movement to foreground African heritage, language, and identities, the impact of this movement itself is limited when political bodies barely pay lip service to it. Meanwhile, individual iimbongi are part of a

diverse tribe ranging from humble poets with an altruistic concern for society to astute showmen seeking career opportunities in a lean and individualistic marketplace where public success—or lack thereof—is not necessarily a reflection of poetic talent. Whichever position they speak from, it is not obvious that imbongi fulfill their previous role of giving voice to popular grievances, or that they can be counted on to advance a progressive agenda. Instead, as a left-talking liberation movement has gone walking off to the right, it may be that imbongi have also followed the new opportunities that democracy has given rise to. As they say, money talks.

This chapter explores the contemporary political role of the amaXhosa imbongi within the decadent assemblage of post-colonial, post-apartheid structures and the vocal popular struggles that have shaped the social and political landscapes of contemporary South Africa. I begin with an examination of my interviews with practicing imbongi and their perspectives on the issue of censorship in the political landscape of contemporary South Africa. I then turn my attention to Zolani Mkiva, poet laureate to the late Nelson Mandela and one of the most prominent iimbongi practicing today, using his work and criticism of his work as a means of discussing the difficult topic of commercialization of the izibongo genre. Building on these discussions of political censorship and commercialization, I then analyse the transcription of an izibongo performed at the 2016 State of the Nation Address. In my discussion, I show how the poem is limited by both censorship and commodification yet nevertheless works within these constraints to engage in a veiled yet potent political critique. Finally, I turn my attention to the general absence of women iimbongi, linking this to social factors that, as in the past, continue to erase the presence of women and inhibit their voices at every level of society.

Given these factors and the current constraints on the izibongo craft, I argue that the

primary role of the imbongi has shifted; much of their contemporary power lies less in their political acumen than in their ability to satisfy a hunger for cultural connection, to resist the Western hegemony that threatens to define the South African identity and to infuse a specifically African identity and worldview into mainstream culture and politics. In this respect, their voices retain their transformative power in a tumultuous period of decolonization and change.

Figures of speech?

In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela comments on the particular power of the imbongi, recollecting his sensations on witnessing the arrival of the great poet S.E.K. Mqhayi during his studies at Healdtown, a Methodist college in Fort Beaufort, not far from Grahamstown, in the late 1930s: “The sight of a black man in tribal dress coming through that door was electrifying. It is hard to explain the impact it had on us. It seemed to turn the universe upside down” (1994, 36). He goes on to describe Mqhayi’s performance, which included a denunciation of White domination of Black South African society. Mandela remarks, “I could hardly believe my ears. His boldness in speaking of such delicate matters in the presence of Dr. Wellington and other whites seemed utterly astonishing to us. Yet at the same time, it aroused and motivated us, and began to alter my perception of men like Dr. Wellington, whom I had automatically considered my benefactor” (1994, 36).

During his fifty-year career as a journalist, historian and imbongi, the great isiXhosa poet Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi foretold of South Africa’s coming liberation. His performance that day at Healdtown awakened a new sense of nationalistic pride in Mandela, who recognised from that moment that Black subservience and disempowerment had been a fundamental feature of South African society since the arrival of Europeans. Mandela’s

account suggests that the nature of White supremacy in South Africa—a cultural norm thoroughly embedded in public consciousness—was difficult to perceive, let alone question, without a critical intervention such as that offered by Mqhayi. The process of generating similar awakenings in others and producing the critical consciousness necessary for a political transition took decades and required many cultural interventions, including the Black Consciousness movement led by Steve Biko in the 1970s (Biel 2000), the rise of Black newspapers and radio programs that accompanied the urbanization of Black South African culture through the 1960s and 70s (Lodge 2011), and the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid verse written and performed by generations of iimbongi (Opland 2005, 1998).

To highlight the importance of African arts, culture, and heritage in the New South Africa, Nelson Mandela offered the young Zolani Mkiva a prominent platform, placing his performance at the beginning of the program at the first democratic presidential inauguration ceremony. In doing so, Mandela clearly understood the emotional power of the iimbongi among the amaXhosa, if not all Black South Africans. As well as signalling Mandela's intention to recalibrate a culturally skewed society, the inclusion of iimbongi at this auspicious event can also be understood as an astute political move designed to confirm the triumph of the ANC party, inspire confidence in Mandela as a leader, and distract citizens from the party's political dealings by promoting the image of an African cultural renaissance.

Despite Mandela's impressive achievements, his role in promoting cultural and political expression is equivocal; he knew first-hand the power of iimbongi to turn the tide of public consciousness and, as the political tide ebbed and eddied in the final decade of the twentieth century, he may also have had a hand in silencing them. On 25 February 1990, newly released from Robben Island and confronted with some of the most brutal violence

South Africa had yet seen, Mandela addressed a crowd of some hundred thousand followers in Durban: “My message to those of you involved in this battle of brother against brother is this: take your guns, your knives, and your pangas, and throw them into the sea. Close down the death factories. End this war now!” (Mandela 1990). One of Mandela’s best known speeches, it denounces the prolonged and deadly clashes between the amaZulu Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the primarily amaXhosa ANC that threatened to plunge the country into a full-blown civil war (Lodge 2011). Yet for poet and activist Nise Malange, who had risen to prominence as a performer and educator during the trade union movement of the 1980s, the speech marked a turning point for freedom of speech and political criticism. During our conversation in late 2015, Malange explained how the subtext of Mandela’s speech made it clear that, like physical violence, criticism of the new Black leaders violated the new spirit of peace and solidarity:

The other side of [that speech] was for us as praise singers no longer [to] sing against Buthelezi,¹⁹ about Botha,²⁰ [...] because there were a lot of people that were doing it, [...] nothing that would be “anti” any of the leaders. So that was the kind of reconciliation that was imposed on people. That created a quiet moment because you’re told by the leader that now you’re not supposed to be protesting, you’re not supposed to be saying all these resistant things, you know. For the sake of peace.

(Malange 2016)

Mandela’s heavy emphasis on unity and peace may have stemmed from the ANC’s policy of keeping “a tight reign [sic] on heterodoxy and dissent within its ranks” (Marais

¹⁹ Praise singers: another term for iimbongi. Buthelezi: Mangosuthu Buthelezi, founder of the IFP in 1975 and chief minister of the KwaZulu Bantustan until 1994.

²⁰ P.W. Botha, South African Prime Minister from 1978 to 1984 and State President from 1984 to 1989 who was instrumental in the development of apartheid and a staunch opponent of Black majority rule.

2001, 74). The policy intensified under the subsequent Mbeki administration when “it was not only within the state where demands were made for absolute loyalty to the cause, but in the wider society those with dissenting views often faced ridicule, marginalisation and attacks on their integrity. The smear is one of the most devastating weapons for stifling debate and silencing critics” (Gumede and Dikeni 2009, 2). William Gumede explains further:

During liberation struggles, decision-making is necessarily left in the hands of a few. Dissent and criticism are seldom allowed lest they expose divisions within the movement, which could be exploited by the enemy. But if non-criticism continues during the first crucial years of power, it becomes entrenched as part of the political culture. In the early years of liberation, governments often operate as if under siege. Critics are marginalised, making criticism almost impossible later [...] Alarming, quite legitimate criticism of the ANC government has been portrayed as disloyal, the critics being labelled racists or enemies of the state. This has often led to the withdrawal of intellectuals from public debate. [...] No reasonable debate on policies can take place in a situation where those who propose alternatives are seen as the enemy who need to be annihilated and destroyed. Such self-imposed censorship as prevailed during the Mbeki era comes at a cost to a developing society like South Africa, where every innovative idea matters. (Gumede 2009, 14-17)

While the approach helped prevent the country from sliding into civil war in the years immediately before and after apartheid, the tone has weighed on poets and intellectuals alike, casting a pall over Malange’s work as a social critic and liberation activist. Years later, despite

worsening economic and political conditions and the vocal and often violent protests, an overbearing climate of censorship continues to stifle her work.

There's a lot of capitalism that has been entrenched within the trade union movement. [...] There's no way that you can sit there and get workers to think and be critical of the union leadership today, because all [the union leaders] see would be that these people want to criticize us and it is wrong to do that. [...] The field is not as fertile as in the past and I'm sure all the workers out there will still yearn for that. They probably write and put it in their drawer for the next life, because that's what I do. That's what I do. I just write and put things there and read for reflection and ask questions [...]: is this the kind of freedom that we're fighting for? You know? And it's the same question now—it's even worse. This is what we fought for? Because that's what we're asking ourselves all the time. Do we have to go into exile in order to be able to write? (Malange 2016)

Malange and presumably other iimbongi experienced this silencing at a crucial moment in the country's political history. As the balance of power shifted from the White minority to a new Black political elite, the radical movements of the past that might have called for redress were stifled by a new rightist hegemony that on one hand promised change while on the other removed possibilities for such change to occur. As Richard Peet explains,

Time after time, the leadership of the ANC has responded to the demands of its militant supporters by promising that South Africa's abundant wealth will finally be devoted to the welfare of the black majority. Yet, despite evident political gains in the post-apartheid

period, the economic resolve of a newly liberated people has been frustrated by severe limitations on policy in a neoliberal global era. At root, the dilemma facing South Africa's people is lack of social control over the direction taken by the national economy. More specifically, the problem here, as elsewhere in the Third World, is the lack of a viable developmental program that achieves economic growth through redistributing incomes and satisfying needs. The tensions between a people persuaded that their time has finally come and an economic structure that, even following liberation, can satisfy but a fragment of long pent-up demands leads to a crisis of national conscience. (2002)

The root of acquiescence

Bound up in the issue of censorship and political exploitation of iimbongi is the question of commercialization. In a democratic and neoliberal nation, the moral imperative of toppling apartheid has passed, but the desperate need to make a living remains. In contemporary South Africa, "it is not uncommon for iimbongi to have their own agents who organise their performance dates and look after their monetary matters. Iimbongi can charge anything up to 1000 rands or more for a performance, depending on their status and reputation" (Kaschula and Diop 2000). This complicates the iimbongi's traditional role: even as their calling demands forthrightness, economic and political realities require them to watch their words. In Malange's opinion, the new commercial culture empties poems of their content and drains them of political power.

The poetry that is happening today doesn't address the issues. I think that the power izibongo had in the past— I don't think it plays the

same role as it did in the past because it's not driven by people. It's commercialized. There's imbongi for the president and a person who gets paid to follow up. So the impact and the cultural role and the political role, they're lost within commercialization of the culture.

(Malange 2016)

On the other hand, Mandlenkosi Dyakala, a young Grahamstown-based imbongi, denies that this is the case. Dyakala, who grew up in the rural community of Salem, a half hour from Grahamstown, understands his artistic practice as both a literary and a spiritual calling, similar to that of a traditional healer, and has immense respect for the tradition he is part of. During an interview in English and isiXhosa in early 2016, he explained to me that iimbongi cannot be commercialized because it is impossible to coerce an imbongi to say particular things. Instead, they respond to an inner conviction and commitment to conveying a message; they cannot be bought.

Dyakala: You can't just tell imbongi don't say this, say this. No. You can't just say, "You see imbongi, I need you to praise here but just say this and this." You can't just say that to imbongi. It's imbongi who decides: "No, I have to speak in this way, I have to speak in that way at this time."²¹

McGiffin: So they know they can't tell the imbongi what to say.

Dyakala: No, they can't tell imbongi what to say. Even if you are going to pay me. Just take your money! If there's a mayor, if he's corrupt, I should tell him so, even if the municipality is going to pay me. So I

²¹ In this and subsequent chapters, I have quoted extensively from my interviews with both iimbongi and their audiences out of respect for the opinions and ideas of these research participants as voiced in their own words. In most cases, the lengthy quotations included could not have been paraphrased or shortened without compromising the context, voice, and thread of thought that are central to the ideas themselves.

should tell the mayor that the things that you're doing are not good for the community. The community is suffering because there's a corruption in the municipality so please, fix those things to the community. So even if they're going to pay just...keep their money if they don't want to pay me. As long as I've expressed what I feel.

Yet as the interview progressed, it became clear that the situation is in fact more complex.

With assistance from an interpreter, Dyakala explained:

Interpreter: So what's happening, currently there's changes because it's hard for them to express themselves most of the time. Now, if I express my true poetry, my true appraisal, then it might lead to a point where some of the people that I'm praising will feel offended and then mouth me around to other people that I must not be called upon to do a certain praise in a certain ceremony. Because now, [...] even though I know the mayor is corrupt—the imbongi's supposed to say that if he wants to, but if he says that, there's the possibility that he will never be called again.

McGiffin: That's what I was wondering in terms of the payment, for example. Whether they would say no, we're not paying this guy. We'll get the other one who says what we want him to say.

Dyakala: Yes! Yes. [...] So as he says, now [the imbongi] has to adjust his words. Some things, he can feel that he wants to say them, but he has to hold them. But as imbongi he has the right to say those things but then it's kind of hard these days, through politics. Because politics are an issue these days. Politics they enter anywhere at this time.

McGiffin: So you find you have to censor—

Dyakala: Yes.

McGiffin: —what you're saying.

Dyakala: Yes.

McGiffin: And that's something that didn't happen in the past?

Dyakala: No. No.

Similarly, Yakobi Sixham, an imbongi based in the township of Zwelitsha that adjoins the city of King Williamstown, comments on changes to the tradition, including commercialization that has not only prevented iimbongi from expressing themselves freely, but has also affected the very content and tenor of their thinking.

Iimbongi long ago praised animals which belonged to the royal palace and they received nothing in exchange. They would just praise the chief and leave when they had finished. Then times changed. Now, iimbongi are invited to praise at weddings, political rallies and community events; they benefit. They've become commercialized, unlike the way it used to be. I used to stand and praise and then leave. Now it has changed to become something I can live off, that's how it changed. That has even changed attitudes of iimbongis—times have changed and the way they see things has changed too. If you are the one who always invites me to your ceremonies, *it means that I should see things the way you see them* so that I can eat. Even though I see you that you are not doing right, that you are misleading people, I don't say anything about it. Yes, I need to eat my sister.²² (Sixham 2016, emphasis added)

²² Translated from isiXhosa by Dumisa Mpupha.

Finnegan points out that it is not a new phenomenon for iimbongi to be compensated for their work in ways that might compromise their objectivity: “Some poets, it is clear already, are associated with royal courts and receive reward as professionals. Others depend on private enterprise, perhaps wandering from patron to patron and living on their wits” (Finnegan 2012, 84). Yet there is a difference between traditional rewards and contemporary commercialization of the genre that becomes evident when deeper aspects of the imbongi’s calling are considered—a difference reflected in the divergent experiences of rural and township iimbongi. Thokozani Ntshuntsha is a young teacher in Willowvale who leads a youth performance troupe in addition to pursuing his own calling as an imbongi. When we spoke in the schoolyard in early December, 2015, Ntshuntsha described the vivid childhood dreams that portended his being struck by lightning a short time later. After the incident, the dreams continued:

Ntshuntsha: And I was so amazed of the dreams. So what I’m saying is that the imbongi, although you cannot believe what I’m saying, that is what is happening to them. You understand? The way these things come, the words come. No matter you’re going to close your mouth, thinking that the words won’t come out, they come. They come. It will come, it will come, it will come. And the only way to take those words for you is just to record. You understand?

McGiffin: I see. So you can’t repeat it again.

Ntshuntsha: You cannot. You cannot. No, no. You cannot.

McGiffin: Ok.

Ntshuntsha: It happens. I don’t know.

McGiffin: So how did you know, at what point in your life, that you

were an imbongi? That you had these words that needed to come out?

Ntshuntsha: People.

McGiffin: People were telling you?

Ntshuntsha: [affirming] People. Because you'll be going here and there because of inviting you. And people will tell you that you are—
This is not normal.

McGiffin: It's not normal.

Ntshuntsha: Yes.

Ntshuntsha did not choose to be an imbongi; the talent within him was called forth by people who recognized his abnormal facility for language and sought him out. During performances such as Ntshuntsha's, imbongi and audience alike are often rendered nearly powerless in the face of a sudden flow of words that can be neither stanchied nor interrupted. At the same time, the understanding between imbongi and patron includes the possibility that the imbongi might not perform at all:

Once I told someone that when you are calling the imbongi to come and make praises, make sure that even when you're paying your man, na? Maybe the imbongi cannot come through, maybe he will come through. You understand? If it's coming from emotions and those ancestors or other things. Because imbongi does not know what to say until the voices, the emotions can come to talk. Understand? It's like that. (Ntshuntsha 2015)

In Ntshuntsha's context, an imbongi can neither be told what to say nor be held responsible for remaining silent. Thus, the words that do come gain additional power through the fact that their arrival has never been guaranteed. In being true to their calling,

imbongi cannot fabricate a message that doesn't exist. Furthermore, as Ntshuntsha alluded above, not anyone can be an imbongi; the practice requires not only a special talent but a particular gift.

McGiffin: So for example do you see people who aren't necessarily imbongi but these praises come to them so they just start praising, like you were saying the cows, the trees. Anyone can do that?

Ntshuntsha: Not anyone. That's why I'm saying that it's like a blessing.

McGiffin: A blessing?

Ntshuntsha: Because... A long time ago, we as Xhosas when I read some books were respecting poets, which is imbongi, were respecting them so much. The reason is that even if there will be a war you find imbongi coming, saying where, talking with people. Talking with people about what is going to happen. Before the thing happens. You understand? [...] Even the king. There is not any king that is not having an imbongi. The reason is, I think, maybe smart, because I was asking even the King Zwelonke. I was asking him, why do you wait before imbongi stops? Why don't you speak while... you understand? They respect imbongi. Even the presidents. They respect imbongi. They will wait for the imbongi to talk and talk and talk and sit down. Because they know that even through what they are going to say, maybe there is something that they can get from there, this imbongi, before they can talk with the people. And sometimes, they can tell you that maybe you must be aware of something that can happen, now. Maybe people are not happy about you. Because the poet, as I said before, can speak

everything. No matter you like, no matter you don't like it. You understand? Because it's something that comes from the heart, you understand?

McGiffin: Ok, so even if they are saying things that the— They might say bad things about the king?

Ntshuntsha: The king must listen.

McGiffin: He has to stay silent?

Ntshuntsha: He's silent!

Ntshuntsha's statements indicate that what has been characterized by Western scholars as the imbongi's "poetic licence" to criticize figures of authority with impunity is actually a complex set of understandings regarding the nature and power of words and their provenance, the imbongi's obligation to utter them and the danger of failing either in speaking or listening. Yet despite the public and political respect for the tradition that persists into the present, the situation is complicated here too:

McGiffin: So they invite you to come to events and things?

Ntshuntsha: To events... But now it's like business. It's not like before. [...] You'll find that now the poet will be put on the program. But before, the poet, you would not put the poet on the program. He's just like someone who's disturbing your occasion. You understand? So the only thing that you can do when you invite imbongi is just tell people that I invited imbongi, he is around. Don't be afraid! Because sometimes [he'll] stop, stop and do those things.

McGiffin: So it's not like, at 3 o'clock the imbongi is going to perform.

Ntshuntsha: No, no, argh! You're wasting your time!

Ntshuntsha's words suggest that in the rural Transkei, respect for tradition encourages the continued acceptance of the power and primacy of the spoken word and the mysterious source of the messages the imbongi brings. There is an inherent unruliness not necessarily to iimbongi themselves, but to the spirit or spirits that compel them to speak. There is also a magnificence to the spoken words that transcends a mere literary or political practice. The understanding of the imbongi and their verse as a medium of communication with ancestral shades may have enabled a greater freedom of expression than what is possible in a Western political economy with its strict notions of time and social conduct that makes no allowances for the whims of spirits. Yet the unpredictable practice that Ntshuntsha describes contravenes Western expectations of performing artists. Thus as iimbongi have moved out of traditional realms and into modern secular society unschooled or uninterested in traditional spiritualities, so too has their ability to criticize and provoke been eroded. Ntshuntsha's closing lines above reveal the tension of a tradition in transition. In some contexts, iimbongi still retain an element of control over the timing of their performances and their content and duration—traditions that Ntshuntsha would like to see continue. Yet public understandings and expectations of the tradition are clearly shifting. As the presence of iimbongi at gatherings increasingly becomes a business transaction, iimbongi find themselves placed between acts on a program, squeezed by the expectations of clients and audiences who want a good performance, a punctual performance, and a performance that doesn't exceed five minutes.

Iimbongi in the political economy

Zolani Mkiva

The tension that exists between the tradition of the imbongi as an outspoken political figure

and the various constraints on their practice only increases as imbongi move beyond community gatherings and onto the mainstage of national politics. The contemporary imbongi Zolani Mkiva began his career as apartheid ended, taking the podium to praise newly-elected President Nelson Mandela on the day of his presidential inauguration. From these auspicious beginnings, Mkiva regularly accompanied Mandela at public appearances to become perhaps the nation's best-known imbongi. His high-profile public persona breathed new spirit into the art form and helped it gain widespread recognition, particularly among an enthusiastic following of young iimbongi across the Eastern Cape.

Mkiva's fame is no doubt assisted by his marketing savvy. Recordings of his performances are available on YouTube and iTunes; on his personal website, he offers an impressive list of public appearances and offers online purchases of his albums and his personal brand of merchandise (Mkiva 2011a). Perhaps most significantly, Mkiva's commercial performances include not only an address at Nelson Mandela's funeral but an advertisement for the South African First National Bank, official sponsor of the FIFA 2010 World Cup.

This commercial success has also earned him detractors. In particular, cultural critic Raphael d'Abdon is dismissive of Mkiva's poetry, claiming that it fails artistically and creatively even as it succeeds commercially (d'Abdon 2015). In d'Abdon's appraisal, "Mkiva is an astute entrepreneur who utilizes izibongo as a device to gain the favour of well-targeted, affluent audiences, thus contributing to a hazardous commodification and commercialization of post-apartheid poetry" (d'Abdon 2015, 315). Furthermore, d'Abdon claims that Mkiva exploits "the noble art of izibongo as an instrument to make money" via "his subservient attitude towards the questionable leaders of the political and economic-financial establishment of this country (and beyond)" (d'Abdon 2015, 318).

Taking d'Abdon's perspective, it would seem that, like the ANC party itself, Mkiva has sold out, packaging easily consumed verses for sale in the commercial world. Yet it is also true that Mkiva is using his position to insist that the commercial world include Africans. At the end of 2015, I paid a visit to Mkiva at his ancestral home in the village of Bholotywa, near Willowvale in the Mbashe municipality. A community elder had died the day before, and we sat talking in the midst of preparations for the funeral: one team of men had slaughtered a cow in the kraal outside and were in the process of butchering it, another erected a tent in the dirt yard in front of the house. Members of the Mkiva family are traditional leaders of three communities surrounding their home, which is relatively majestic in size, suitable for hosting the crowds that were already beginning to gather. Here Mkiva explained to me some of his political and cultural philosophy.

Mkiva: The winning formula for us as Africans will only be when we do everything that we do in an African way. And it does not close the door from taking the best from the West. Take the best from the West and infuse it in your own arrangement. And you mustn't be peripheral when you talk about that. We're not saying we must go back to wearing skins. If these clothes that we are wearing, they are from the West, good enough. Congratulations to the West, we are wearing your clothes. But the content of our character is what I'm talking about. The thinking patterns is what I'm talking about. I don't have to export my brain to Britain in order to think about how to survive in Africa. No. [...] I use a lot of technology. I am brutally exploiting technology in order to enhance that which belongs to me. I am the first imbongi to put everything on iTunes. I've got my renditions on iStores and iTunes,

which is I think it's good. I must put it on Instagram, I must put it on Facebook, everything. All these instruments, I must use them. It's Western instruments, but I'm putting in the content, which is African, to re-educate and educate society.

McGiffin: You don't see it as exploiting the tradition or commercializing it?

Mkiva: No. Because it's not a commercial subject. It's a subject that I'm putting out there for society and they put on search engines so people are able to get that which they want.

McGiffin: So you're merging the different cultures?

Mkiva: Absolutely. We must do that. We must do that. You know, I am a strong believer in African culture. I agree that one of the weakness of our culture is not to write down things. Or record things. Now if you are not writing you must at least record because writing is also a form of recording. But audio recording and visual recording are also forms of recording. I've done a lot of recording in terms of audio, it's very key. So I say I criticize my culture for not moving quickly in terms of recording. We need to digitize the things that we have. Otherwise they will be overtaken by events given that emotion that is happening at a media level.

McGiffin: Right, so you use Western tools to boost up the traditional culture and keep that alive.

Mkiva: Yes, to preserve it as well. It's very critical for me.

Mkiva promotes his cultural and decolonial politics—which include emphatic support for free speech, Indigenous language education, and the validity of Indigenous justice systems—through the Mkiva Humanitarian Foundation which “helps the rural people on a number of issues relating to education, development of arts & culture, welfare and education” (Mkiva 2011a). Little information on the Foundation’s activities is available online apart from scattered references to the Mkiva Humanitarian Awards, established in 1999 “in memory of Richard Mkiva, a community activist and fighter for the rights of rural communities who was poisoned in 1959 by colonial forces” (Rawlings 2013). The 2013 recipients of the award included former Ghanaian President J.J. Rawlings, who Mkiva crowned Global Champion for People’s Freedom. Rawlings’s acceptance speech, delivered at the Butterworth campus of Walter Sisulu University, denounced the abuse of power at global and national scales, and called on leaders to seek alternatives to unbridled capitalism in South Africa and beyond:

Ladies and Gentlemen: We achieved freedom and national sovereignty at a heavy price, but 50 years on can we be proud of what we have achieved as freedom fighters? Are those of us in positions of leadership and authority today doing enough to defend our people’s rights and to safeguard our freedoms? A few too many of us have squandered the independence that was won for us at great cost. The corruption and impunity that we see especially across our continent and beyond is threatening to become the norm. And an immoral and corrupted form of capitalism unaccountable to anyone and uncontrollable will no doubt contribute to stress and instability in some of our countries. [...]

My dear brothers and sisters, let us not allow the monster of unbridled

and corrupted capitalism and political power to dominate us and create a new form of political insensitivity under which people who fought with us to create an equal and just society use their new found wealth and political power to lord it over the people and exploit their vulnerability. We owe it to those whose blood was spilled to compel our leadership at national, party and local level to protect national interests and ensure that the wealth of our countries is not hijacked.

(Rawlings 2013)

Mkiva's public endorsement of such an outspoken figure illustrates the nature of the politics that underlies his poetry, despite the commercial appropriation of his image and message. His ideological stance is at odds with the South African hegemony that has embraced colonial institutions and languages as the organizing principles of a liberated nation, despite official commitments to multilingualism and ethnic pluralism (e.g., Hill 2009). In contrast, Mkiva argues for a reconfiguration of institutions and cultural policies to align more closely with African traditions and worldviews. During an interview with Duncan Brown, Mkiva emphasized the agency and power inherent to the act of creating, and the spin-off effects of African cultural production: "culture is our own creation, it is a true design of life. And if we need redesign of life, it's going to be done by us" (Brown and Kiguli 2006, 144).

D'Abdon's critique of Mkiva's poetry is rigorous, and in certain respects rings true. Lacklustre couplets such as "I do not have a dog nose / But I can smell and distinguish between carbon-monoxide and oxygen" (Mkiva 2011b) certainly support the claim that Mkiva's success is not based on an ear for poetry alone. At the same time, like earlier critics of the worker poets, d'Abdon takes a narrow view of Mkiva's poetry, failing to consider

either in the isiXhosa language or within the complex cultural assemblage of which it is part. Instead, d'Abdon's critique is limited to a collection of poems Mkiva produced in English, a poem originally performed in isiXhosa and translated into English by an Afrikaans writer, and Mkiva's personal website. Yet Mkiva by his own admission is not an English poet; he mainly performs in isiXhosa, even for English-speaking audiences. Mkiva's website, while emblematic of the commercialization of the izibongo genre, is also a staunch testament to his ideology of using "the best of the West" to advance African culture and languages. Mkiva offers one version of a decolonized South Africa, one in which "Africanness" is mainstream, with political and corporate systems built around African aesthetics, cultural identities and values.

For Mkiva, adopting modern modes of cultural reproduction and distribution does not compromise the integrity of traditional art forms. On the contrary, the redesign of life in South Africa must engage with mainstream culture on African terms. Mkiva asserts the equal authority and validity of African identity and tradition in a world that has alternately appropriated and maligned them. As the first imbongi to perform at high-profile, televised events viewed by millions of South Africans, Mkiva not only demonstrated a means of bringing African culture to the fore in a newly democratic nation, he has used this platform to articulate his decolonial politics of African autonomy, linguistic and cultural independence, and economic and legal sovereignty.

I had travelled to Bholotywa in the company of my research assistant, a community arts worker trained at Walter Sisulu University, and a friend who works as a civil engineer. Both in their mid-twenties, they had been raised in the rural countryside outside of Willowvale but later left to pursue their education and careers. Our trip home involved a heated debate over Mkiva's politics, which they disagreed with in various ways. They were

not supportive of Mkiva's ideas about Indigenous language education, as they felt that English clearly opened the door to economic opportunities while being obliged to study yet another language in school (particularly one that they deemed unhelpful from an economic perspective) would place an unacceptable burden on students. Mkiva's ideas about prosecuting traditional leaders through the traditional legal system were new to them and they deemed them equally preposterous. It seemed that, for these members of the younger generation at least, language and heritage are inextricable aspects of their identity, and yet are also experienced as hindrances in achieving the illusory promises of the New South Africa. It also seemed that Mkiva's messages offered them plenty of food for thought.

Stage of the nation

In the contemporary political economy of South Africa, iimbongi are both victims of silencing and guilty of silencing as well. As President Jacob Zuma rose to deliver his address during Nelson Mandela's funeral, he was met with the loud derision of a vocal populace disgruntled with the latest revelations related to Zuma's exorbitant expenditures on his private residence at Nkandla using public funds (Kaschula 2016). Zolani Mkiva stepped up to the microphone ahead of Zuma, shushing the crowd before going on to deliver an isibongo devoid of criticism for either the current or the past administration (Kaschula 2016). Through these actions, Mkiva turned his back on the imbongi's celebrated role of giving voice to public sentiment and speaking truth to power, instead silencing the public on behalf of power itself. His motives, as he explains, were to save face for South Africa at an internationally televised event and to separate a contemporary political fiasco from the memorial for a revered international hero.

Mkiva: During the memorial service of Nelson Mandela, at the FNB

stadium, [...] President Zuma was about to talk and the Master of Ceremonies had already announced that the president is about to deliver a keynote address. And then the people started making noise booing the president in the memorial service. Who was wrong? Was it the president? Was it the people? What was the occasion? The occasion was in memory of Nelson Mandela. So if you've got an issue with the President, don't raise that issue in the memorial service of Nelson Mandela. So the people were wrong. So an imbongi came and put the people down, and then the president spoke.

McGiffin: He said this is not the time and place?

Mkiva: Not in so many words. He just came in and said, "Settle down. The president of the country is about to deliver a eulogy in memory of Nelson Mandela, our beloved president." That's why I'm saying not in so many words. You don't have to say "you can't do what you are doing". You just say "Settle down. The president is about to deliver a eulogy in front of the international community. Settle down." And people settled down.

The incident shows that iimbongi continue to play an influential political role in South Africa, albeit very different from the one that has been so celebrated by progressive scholars. The new avenues of expression they have found do not sit well with some observers. James Matthews, "an 'activist' poet and writer, who has published extensively and [...] was repeatedly jailed by the apartheid regime for his 'subversive' poetry, writing and activism" (Gumede and Dikeni 2009, xi), comments,

What further distresses me is that some poets have allowed themselves

to become praise singers for a political party. Their verses that sustained people in their rage against apartheid's abomination are now structured into sycophantic symphonies lauding the new political elite. They have become unmindful of their poetic role performed in the revolution. Will they now place their verses on the altar of political expediency? (Matthews 2009, 57)

A prominent public position is held by the imbongi who performs at the annual State of the Nation Address (SONA). First delivered at the opening of the new parliament in 1994, SONA is an address by the President of the Republic of South Africa to "a joint sitting of the two houses of Parliament, the National Assembly (NA) and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP). It focuses on the current political and socio-economic state of the nation" (Government of South Africa 2016). On 11 February 2016, as the Speaker of the National Assembly, the Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces and the President of the Republic of South Africa filed into the packed House of Parliament to the applause of the standing Members, the singular voice of an amaZulu imbongi accompanied their arrival (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2016). From the recording of the televised performance available online, Dumisa Mpupha, an imbongi and translator from Grahamstown, prepared a transcription and preliminary translation of the performance and provided an in-person interpretation. The full transcription and translation of the poem is included in the Appendix.

In the recording, the SONA imbongi, or isimbongi, as they are known in isiZulu, is a young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties. He wears a leopard skin over his shoulders, another around his waist, leopard skin armbands and a fuchsia ostrich plume in his leopard skin headband. He carries a broad, flat assegai with which he gestures for effect throughout his

performance.²³ As he speaks, the assembled Members of Parliament remain standing and cheer intermittently in response to his words. The imbongi is poised and self-assured yet modest; although he gestures and speaks strongly, emphasizing particular words, he doesn't shout or draw attention to himself through elaborate postures or vocalizations. Neither does he make eye contact with anyone in the crowd during his two-minute oration. While the poet's presence at the occasion illustrates the cultural and ceremonial importance of the imbongi, the calculated brevity and innocuousness of his performance would also seem to indicate that, in this context at least, the imbongi is symbolic, a form of lip service to traditional protocol that, in actuality, has been coopted to serve the interests of political power.

The imbongi's poem centres on President Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma, who served as deputy president of South Africa under Thabo Mbeki from 1999 to 2005 and has been the incumbent president of South Africa since 2009 (Legassick 2016). A member of the African National Congress since 1959, Zuma joined the armed militant group Umkhonto we Sizwe in 1962 before being arrested in 1963 and sentenced to a ten-year prison sentence on Robben Island. Following his release in 1973, Zuma became one of the lead implementers of the ANC underground structures before fleeing the country in 1975. For the next decade, he continued to serve as a principal organizer for the ANC while in exile in Swaziland, Mozambique and Zambia (Kavanagh and Riches 2016). In 1990, when the ban on the ANC was lifted, Zuma returned to South Africa and joined other ANC leaders in negotiating South Africa's transition to democracy.

Since then, Jacob Zuma's political career has been fraught with legal battles. In 2005 his financial adviser and funder, Schabir Shaik, was convicted of charges that included

²³ Assegai: traditional spear.

bribing Zuma, then Deputy President to President Thabo Mbeki (de Wet 2016). Fired by Mbeki in 2005, Zuma returned to defeat Mbeki in the ANC leadership race in 2007 after his case was thrown out of court (de Wet 2016). In December 2007, after defeating incumbent Thabo Mbeki in the ANC leadership race, he was once again charged with corruption and fraud, along with “additional charges of money laundering, racketeering, and tax evasion”—charges that were ultimately dismissed due to a legal technicality (Legassick 2016). Since at least 2015, Zuma’s presidency has been teetering on the brink of dissolution. He survived an impeachment motion levelled against him by the DA in late 2015 (Gqirana 2015), has ignored repeated calls to step down, and, following a corrupt scheme to oust Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan on trumped up charges (Powell 2016), was the subject of the largest popular demonstration since 1994 (Haden 2017).

Jacob Zuma is amaZulu, as is his imbongi. Thus, the SONA poem arises from a different linguistic and cultural tradition with its own poetic conventions. The praises of isiZulu izimbongi are “short sentences commemorative of notable actions and events in his life” (Cope 1968, qtd in Opland 1998, 43) that, unlike izibongo in the isiXhosa tradition, are generally memorized (Opland 1998). As Jeff Opland explains, “The izibongo of Zulu chiefs are produced by court poets, izimbongi, and transmitted in a fixed form” (Opland 1998, 43). Despite these differences, isiXhosa izibongo and isiZulu izimbongi have much in common. Both are forms of panegyric poetry, a genre traditionally performed in court for chiefs and monarchs during special events that draws heavily on genealogies, praise names and historical events. As such, it has a deep political import.

A knowledge of accepted history in the sense of the glorification of the great deeds of royal ancestors or present rulers was a necessary part of the cultivation of panegyric poetry, and that praise poems are a fruitful

source of the currently authorized interpretations of certain historical events and genealogies. What we always come back to in the productions of these court poets is the adulatory aspect, giving rise to poetry of profound political significance as a means of political propaganda, pressure, or communication. (Finnegan 2012, 85)

The SONA poem conforms to the panegyric genre, displaying several features that are linked directly to the political context in which it was performed. Overall, the poem is ebullient, celebrating a President who is both magnanimous and wise, able to overcome adversity which includes the treachery and disloyalty of those around him. Yet even as the imbongi praises Zuma's courage, learning and leadership, there is a backhanded quality to this praise. Take, for example, the lines

Bethiwa okaZum'unecala	They said Zuma is guilty.
Icalokutyholwa ngosopolitik'epalamente	Charges were brought by politicians in parliament,
Amany'amacala etyholwa ziimanty'enkantolo	Other charges were brought by judges in court.
UGedlehlekisa, abanye bemkhamfula	Gedlehlekisa, others disrespected him,
Umazul'az'ayithole	He who walks around until he finds it.
Nanamhlanjena ziyathakaza izizwe zonke	Even today nations are excited,
Uvula bevalile	He opens where it is closed.
Umgoq'abawuvale phakath'epalamente	They conspired against him in parliament,
Bethi ke asoyiphind'ibus'eka Msholoz ²⁴	Saying Msholoz ¹⁶ will never lead again
Nanamhlanj'iyangena	And today he is entering.

Here the poet reminds his audience that Zuma's past is mired in lawsuits and controversy, that he is not universally beloved, and that he has been condemned and conspired against by his colleagues. While the poet's intention is ostensibly to praise Zuma for his courage and strength in overcoming these difficulties, he also places details of Zuma's troubled past into the minds of his listeners without disputing them—a subtle form of criticism that shrewdly

²⁴ Msholozⁱ: Zuma's clan name.

undermines Zuma's power, authority, and credibility in the eyes of his listeners. The same is true of the lines

Ngob'enkhlul'amaAfrik'onke	Because he liberated you, all Africans,
Umdon'omile phezu kweNkandla	A wild tree standing up on Nkandla.
Haye bawulabalabela	Goodness they play around!
Unomfundi woqobo abethi akafundile	The learned said he's uneducated:
Ngiyo baphikisa ngiyoze ngife	I'll disagree with them till I die.
Ufundil'okaMsholoz'ufundisiwe	The son of Msholoz is learned,
Kungafakaz'unina khulu	His grandmother can bear witness.

Here, the imbongi reminds his audience not only of the Nkandla scandal of which Zuma stands accused, but also that, unlike his University of Sussex-educated predecessor, President Thabo Mbeki, Zuma has no formal education. In this matter, "the learned" are ranged against him and only his grandmother can attest to his learning, a statement that, while reflecting the value of traditional learning, hardly seems a compliment, particularly in the patriarchal context in which it occurs.

At the same time, throughout the poem, the imbongi emphasizes the impunity that surrounds Zuma: despite his lack of formal schooling (Tabane 2013), despite a high-profile rape trial (Suttner 2009, Vetten 2014), despite the 783 criminal charges of fraud, corruption, and racketeering filed against him (Ferreira 2016, Southall 2011), despite being found guilty of unconstitutional conduct in benefitting unfairly from state expenditures on his private residence (Pather et al. 2014, Elgot 2016), Zuma has proven unimpeachable. He has remained head of state despite the best attempts of his rivals and irate South African citizens to unseat him, a figure of unparalleled and unassailable power and authority. Thus the imbongi underlines not only Zuma as the leading symbol of dominance and masculinity in the country, but also the awesome and incontestable power of the ANC.

Mpupha agreed that the poem was prepared beforehand, rather than composed

spontaneously, claiming that in articulating only safe topics it displayed evidence of careful restraint. The poem lauds Zuma in a celebratory spirit, by and large steering clear of anything that might provoke derision or contention. Interestingly, when I suggested to Mpupha that the imbongi seemed to have sold out he heartily disagreed, explaining that as the SONA imbongi was surely an ANC member, and as such his poem unequivocally praising its leader merely displayed party loyalty. Kaschula is very correct in pointing out that “Southern African imbongi often walk a tight-rope between propaganda and criticism” and that, in addition, “there is an intricate relationship between those who control power, and their continued legitimisation through political oratory produced by the poet” (Kaschula and Diop 2000).

It may also be true that in mentioning Nkandla, education, and lawsuits, the imbongi is reminding Zuma of those shortcomings that stand out in the minds of his supporters and adversaries. As one interview participant explained:

The praise singers are actually giving advice or counsel to politicians in terms of how they should behave when they deal with people. So then it's up to that politician to heed the call of that advice. So it actually depends on the particular politician but it's common that the praise singer will then counsel and warn the politician in terms of conduct, how they conduct themselves as leaders.

That is, despite its lack of obvious criticism, the imbongi may be subtly preparing Zuma for an address to a potentially hostile audience, carefully coding their sentiment in messages that Zuma will understand clearly, even if his audience does not. This, after all, is the imbongi's job, as Dyakala and his interpreter pointed out:

Interpreter: Maybe he's just making sure that he's representing the

people. To the leaders. Expressing how the people feel and then showing that to the leaders. So that's his main importance when it comes to praising. [...]

McGiffin: So, as an imbongi, if you see the mayor, for example some mayor is corrupt and you want to say that but you can't say that in a straight way, can you use your language to—

Dyakala: Yes.

McGiffin: —come around—

Dyakala: Around.

McGiffin: Ok.

Dyakala: Which is very important even the comment that this guy's having a talent of saying things. Because even if I know he's corrupt, but I can't just say that "You are corrupt." I need to find a way to tell the mayor that you are corrupt. But at the end of the poem he should understand that he is corrupt but in a good form of way.

McGiffin: Yes, so you're maybe entertaining—

Dyakala: Yes, entertaining, yes, yes.

McGiffin: Making it light, just finding some way...

Dyakala: Yes, yes. That's very important. That's very important.

Through their speech, imbongi transmit a message that a particular subject at an event must receive. Their gift lies in their ability to weave this message into a tapestry of image, metaphor, and praise such that only the intended recipient may fully comprehend it. At least, this is how the role of the imbongi has traditionally been understood. But as various participants pointed out to me, everything is different these days.

A forceful suppression of voice

The political power of the imbongi is further dulled by one of the most glaring shortcomings of contemporary practice. While various participants commented that contemporary iimbongi can be either gender, the practitioners I was able to find and speak with were exclusively male. Among younger practitioners, I was able to find one female poet, a high-school student, who eschewed the traditional style in favour of written and performed poetry in English and Afrikaans about “things we experience daily and things that people can relate to.” Her comments suggest that performances by male iimbongi performing in the traditional style are not representative of the interests and concerns of her or her peers, and that there is little room in the traditional performance style to accommodate her style and voice.

Traditionally, the practice was strictly limited to men and the subject matter of traditional izibongo centres on patriarchal lineages and the achievements of male leaders; both of these aspects of the tradition appear to be foundational to and uncontested within contemporary practice. Yet this form of praise is a practice of erasure as much as celebration. In a commentary on family trees, essayist Rebecca Solnit writes,

I have a friend whose family tree has been traced back a thousand years, but no women exist on it. She just discovered that she herself did not exist, but her brothers did. Her mother did not exist, and nor did her father’s mother. Or her mother’s father. There were no grandmothers. Fathers have sons and grandsons and so the lineage goes, with the name passed on; the tree branches, and the longer it goes on the more people are missing: sisters, aunts, mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, a vast population made to disappear on paper and in history. [...] Thus coherence—of patriarchy, of ancestry, of

narrative—is made by erasure and exclusion. (Solnit 2014, 64-65)

The amaXhosa lineages reproduced and celebrated by iimbongi are based on a similar practice of exclusion that obliterates thousands of people and their lives and achievements from spoken genealogies and, by implication, cultural memory. The ancestral names uttered by iimbongi and their celebrated deeds are those of the *forefathers* who occupy positions of authority and recognition, while the women attached to them remain unnamed and obscure. Within the traditional culture from which izibongo arose, the possibilities for both women's and men's lives are restricted by the dictates of custom and tradition, yet women shoulder particular burdens. Both within the family of their birth, which they are destined to leave after their marriage, and in their husband's family, which they enter as adults, women are denied rights of movement and speech that are available to their brothers and husbands, contributing to a situation in which “they will never really belong anywhere” (Ngcobo 2007) in the sense that their male counterparts will.

Solnit's reflection is part of an essay collection that explores the larger implications of being categorically silenced on account of one's gender and the slippery slope that exists between simply being ignored and having one's voice actively and violently suppressed. She links women's erasure from both genealogies and realm of politics to the rape culture that prevents women from speaking out not only against sexual violence but also against cultures of patriarchy more broadly. In South Africa, a prominent and terrifying culture of sexual violence not only silences over half the population, but also restricts women's freedom of movement and sense of safety. This physically-enforced form of censorship contributes to the maintenance of political dysfunction and the undemocratic distribution of wealth and control of the economic system. Women remain particularly vulnerable among vulnerable groups and particularly subject to sexual violence when they find themselves—as they too

often do—in relationships on which they are economically or socially dependent.

Researchers on South Africa's issue of rampant sexual violence point to significant gender power imbalances, widespread poverty, and a general societal tolerance of rape and violence as being among its principal causal factors (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002). Yet as we have seen, much of the present malaise has its roots in a racist and exploitative system that involved the ongoing deformation of familial and social structures in the name of capital accumulation. The migrant labour system and affiliated structures of segregation, dispossession, forced removals, and tightly regulated habitation and movement that form the foundation of the South African economy, and indeed the South African state, were thoroughly violent. Like other forms of unevenness all too present in South Africa, violence is unequally distributed as well. Yet rather than seeking redress and protection for the most vulnerable members of society, the legal, political, and discursive systems throughout much of South Africa's history upheld and justified ongoing violence against them perpetrated by the powerful. It should come as no surprise that the intergenerational effects of this violence continue to be disproportionately suffered by the most vulnerable—and the most silenced—members of a troubled society.

While much sexual assault occurs in the most intimate of settings, it does not occur in a vacuum. Indeed, “we cannot grasp the true nature of sexual assault without situating it within its larger sociopolitical context” (Davis 1990, 37). In South Africa, as elsewhere, the culture of rape is excused or even endorsed at the highest levels; President Jacob Zuma himself stood trial for rape in 2006, three years before being elected to his current position. His infamous remarks that, “in Zulu culture you cannot leave a woman if she is ready. To deny her sex, that would have been tantamount to rape” sparked public outrage, as did his assertions that his accuser, a woman dubbed Khwezi to protect her identity, was obviously in

a state of arousal because she was wearing a knee-length khanga, a simple garment commonly worn by women throughout the African continent (Smith 2009, Palitza 2006). The comments also derailed the work of scholars and activists who have contested the colonial discourse that constructs sexual violence as a particularly Black or Third World problem rather than investigating the patriarchal nature of South Africa—indeed, Western society—as a whole (Buiten and Naidoo 2016).

Zuma's contemptible defence revealed a corrupt and heartless political culture fashioned around oppression, inequality, and the exploitation of vulnerability, as well as an objectification of women and sense of entitlement to their bodies. His subsequent leadership has set a tone of general acceptance of sexual violence throughout the country. Of the rape trial that concluded with Zuma's acquittal, Lisa Vetten writes,

Like any social practice, narratives are likely to reflect, sustain and reproduce dominant cultural meanings and power relations. [...] Whereas some limited gains have been made in relation to aspects of the law on rape, the decision in the State vs Zuma 2006 reclaims legal ground from feminist interventions by upholding and valorising conservative and exclusionary ideologies around rape, sexuality and gender relations. (2014)

The prevalence of rape in South Africa, legitimized by the President himself, is seen as a means by which men strive to maintain authority and control through the intimidation of women, with the problem becoming particularly pronounced in instances where men face the potential loss of power (Buiten and Naidoo 2016). The fear and stigma that women experience as a result of the normalization of gender-based violence makes the problem of sexual violence difficult to understand in absolute terms because so few women are able to

speak about it. For instance, one recent report found that in Gauteng province only 3.9% of women who had experienced gender-based violence filed police reports and only one in twenty five rapes were reported to police (Machisa et al. 2011). Although 2015-2016 saw a 3.2% decrease in sexual offenses, the Institute for Security Studies has voiced grave concern at this apparent decline, stating that it suggests a decreased rate of reporting rather than a decreased level of offenses (Africa Check 2016). The drastic level of underreporting further underscores the crisis of women's silence, reflecting a combination of women's fear of speaking out and their awareness that they are unlikely to be taken seriously if they do. It also indicates a culture in which "women have such low expectations of genuine sexual negotiation in relationships that being forced to have sex when men (husbands, boyfriends or often would-be lovers) want it, or provide it as a unit of exchange, is seen as "normal" (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002).

The system of patriarchal control in South Africa includes forms of violence up to and including murder—whether of the woman or her children. At the national level, this was played out in the lengthy and high-profile case surrounding Oscar Pistorius's murder of his girlfriend, Reena Steenkamp. Nise Malange spoke about the ways in which the country's history and present experience of violence permeate society at all levels; the repercussions of South Africa's traumatic past include violent acts perpetrated by damaged individuals who have never had the opportunity to heal:

Malange: They've never had any therapy, they've never talked about it, they've never had any of the trauma counselling. And those people are the ones that kill their partners. I mean we have the highest, highest rate today in this country of domestic and culpable homicide. Somebody that just phones the wife and says "I'm killing your children

now, listen to them on the phone” and stab the children and—

McGiffin: Oh, my goodness! When did that happen?

Malange: It happens all the time. It happened... The last case happened last year, just towards August, September. August is woman’s month. August, September, October, November because that’s when there’s activism against women and children abuse so you see the highest rate. And we’ve gone as far now as raping old women, grannies. Until somebody amongst the politicians realizes what causes that and gives us money to go out and work with people because you can’t do these things. I mean I think of all the women....

South Africa’s rape epidemic not only reflects the dismal social and economic status of women in the country, it is also evidence and reinforcement of their silence: violence against women spikes when women dare to speak out. The situation also points to a profound need to heal the pain of past trauma that recirculates through communities, moving from one generation to the next.

The imbongi tradition is neither monolithic nor static (in 2017 the SONA imbongi was a woman), yet my research suggests that this valued social institution is primarily reserved for men. While imbongi are not responsible for South Africa’s culture of patriarchy and sexual violence, it may not be a stretch to say that in failing to help cultivate a safe and welcoming platform for women and in neglecting to encourage women’s participation in this traditionally masculine genre, imbongi are complicit in a broader culture of silencing that enables gender-based violence to go unchallenged. Denied the spaces to raise their voices, women articulate their right to bodily integrity and freedom from violence in the silent spaces available to them. Four women who demonstrated during Zuma’s announcement of

municipal election results at an election centre in Pretoria earlier this year interrupted the President's speech with a silent reminder of their presence and his past. Standing in a row in front of the stage, the women held placards reading, "Khanga," "Remember Khwezi," "I am 1 in 3," and "Ten years later," aiming to "pierce the silence around rape through a silent protest" (Nicholson 2016). Simimakele Dlakavu, one of the women involved remarked, "This is another black feminist protest strategy—of silence" (Nicholson 2016).

Conclusion

In contemporary South Africa, Nelson Mandela is a complicated figure, alternately venerated as a saint, respected as a deeply noble human being, and lambasted as a sell-out. As his imbongi laureate—high profile, commercial, modern—Zolani Mkiva has attracted his own share of criticism, particularly for the lack of obvious critical content and inadequately poetic language of his work in English and in translation (Kaschula 2008, d'Abdon 2015). Yet Mkiva's job as self-proclaimed "Poet of Africa" is not to appease English-speaking audiences. Rather, it is to assert the beauty and validity of a culture, language, and heritage that, after centuries of disparagement, is finally finding its footing in the cultural mainstream. In his own words,

I would say that in the new dispensation of South Africa, I have had the singular honour and privilege of foregrounding the role of imbongi in the South African society. Not only foregrounding it but mainstreaming it, such that each and every key event that occurs in the country has an imbongi. Whether it's at a local level, provincial level or national level, you will see them. In the beginning of the new South Africa, it was me, and me alone, but I advise leaders that this thing

needs to be escalated and I actually ensured that there are workshops so that we take those who are talented with this thing from the outskirts of Limpopo and other provinces and we bring them to the fore. That if you open your legislature, if you make a provincial statement as a premier, make sure that in events like those imbongi is mainstream. This is part and parcel of restoration and it has worked wonders. So today if the president is going to be delivering a State of the Nation address I can assure you that there will be an imbongi in that event. There's no question about it. Yes. It may no longer be me, but the essence is not about me as a person, it's about who we are as a people. It doesn't matter who that imbongi is as long as he's one of us. So it's a revival of the tradition and it's also striking a balance between Western forms and our African forms. So, I'm saying in this day and age it's very relevant and it plays wonders in terms of the path of transforming the landscape of our country. Imbongi has become a national instrument in the transformation of the heritage landscape of South Africa. (Mkiva 2015)

In contemporary South Africa, with its economic preoccupations and political muzzlings, the poetry and role of iimbongi has changed. Mkiva has demonstrated this through his genre-bending work that embraces commercial culture and Western technologies. His contemporaries—the anonymous amaZulu imbongi at the State of the Nation Address, Yakobi Sixham, Mandlenkosi Dyakala—face similar challenges when it comes to adapting their ancient art form to the demands of the contemporary world. Faced with often conflicting allegiances to family, community, political party, tradition and spiritual

calling, they increasingly seek paid gigs and embrace new modes of distribution—all factors that affect their ability to comment on or criticize the political establishment. Yet it also seems that the tradition has changed selectively, embracing particular aspects of modernity while accepting outdated forms of gender oppression.

What is the role of the imbongi in contemporary South Africa? The question is much larger than the politics of commercialization or censorship. To pose the question is to inquire into the nature of the political, economic, and cultural relationships among South Africans generally, and in particular between Western and African societies in the modern nation of South Africa. Whether an imbongi is able to criticize Power is perhaps less important than the question of the ways in which power and voice are exercised more broadly, how shifting forms of oppression are made manifest in post-apartheid South Africa and whether the relationship between forms of power allows the full expression of the tradition the imbongi represents and its potential for the future. Which worldviews are visible in contemporary South African society? Which are credible? Which are given airtime and allowed to speak the languages of their choice? Appraising the existing balance opens the further question of what sort of balance South Africans want. Current conditions in the country—which is rocked by student protests, political scandal, and sexual violence and where much of the population lives in continual fear of violent crime—suggest deep and divisive imbalances. The imbongi's place in this flux is uncertain but, given the opportunity, they will undoubtedly have much to say.

Chapter 6: Ritual poetry and ideologies of development

The greatest problem we have on this continent is a deficit of imagination. We focus too much on feeding the belly, on the politics of the belly. We don't focus enough on the poetics of the belly. Because sometimes it's poetry that allows us to wake up the following day and say yes to existence.

~ Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Founder, Cassava Republic Press

Introduction

South Africa's pernicious and growing disparities, created by a host of political and economic factors, are registered in environmental terms. Apartheid's enforced segregation produced a divided landscape: rural areas were sliced into Bantustans and White-owned farms with urban areas carved out of their midst. In modern cities and towns, residential areas formerly reserved for Whites remain unaffordable for the vast majority of Africans. These neighbourhoods feature tree-lined streets and large, well-appointed houses with expansive gardens ringed by security fences. Meanwhile, in the outlying Black townships at the peripheries of formerly White towns, small, poorly constructed houses are densely packed on denuded land that stands in sunbaked contrast to the lush greenery of treed town sites. In these disenfranchised areas, purposely located at a remove from services and amenities, disruptions in water and electrical services are common; garbage disposal is irregular or non-existent; sewage oozes across the streets; and dogs, cows, and donkeys roam the boulevards, grazing on windblown trash. People's movements and daily activities are tightly circumscribed not only by the availability of public transit (or lack thereof) and the

long distances that they are often compelled to commute, but also by safety and security concerns, which vary from moderate to acute by zone, season, and time of day. The environmental realities of contemporary townships coupled with their traumatic history of violent oppression have resulted in poverty-stricken zones of social exclusion where crimes of all varieties are a daily norm. Environmental conditions have also proven a major contributor to further health problems and social ills. Elevated rates of TB are linked not only to substandard housing but also to the length of time people spend crowded in poorly-ventilated commuter vehicles (Richardson et al. 2016). Residents of informal settlements in particular disproportionately suffer from a range of physical and mental illnesses linked to poor water and air quality, overcrowding, and lack of sanitation (Shortt and Hammett 2013).

Given these circumstances, literature does not appear to be a priority and certainly has not been treated as such by either the apartheid or post-apartheid administrations. Yet in fact literature represents a valuable, if underappreciated, means of redressing social imbalances and divisions. The UN Human Development Index (HDI) offers an alternative measure of development that emphasizes people and their capabilities over economic growth (UNDP 2016). It comprises a variety of indices that together offer a picture of three key dimensions of human development: leading a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable, and having a decent standard of living (UNDP 2016). Among its leading indicators are education and literacy, which are clearly necessary components of a knowledgeable and inclusive society.

Broadly speaking, South Africa is a literate and well-educated nation with a literacy rate of 93.7% for adults over fifteen years of age and an average of ten years of education among the general populace (UNDP 2016). Being literate, however, is a much different condition than having access to literature. The quality of the literature and whether it reflects

the culture, life conditions and priorities of readers is a different question again. The UNHDI offers no index to measure access to literature, nor any measure of the complexity of that literature, who its authors are and what language it is written in. Some of these data gaps have been addressed by recent writers who tell us that, “The South African literary landscape is physically based in the cities, and in the white suburbs. That’s where the publishers are. That’s where the bookstores are. I grew up in a township and I grew up in a village. There are no bookstores there. Here, you’ve got all the literary activity; there, you’ve got absolutely none” (Mallinson 2015). In South Africa, the geography of bookstores, libraries, and publishing houses reflects the post-apartheid landscape in general. Much like access to clean and safe environments, access to cultural goods—in this case literature and publishing—is skewed to favour the middle and upper classes. The publishing industry—rather understandably, given the lean and fickle marketplace within which it must operate and the shortage of government support—does not cater to the poor majority nor represent their perspectives, environments, or languages, which remain marginal and undervalued.

When it comes to making and reading literature, these absences and inequalities are detrimental to human wellbeing on the whole and to the possibilities for human development. As I have shown in previous chapters, the social and economic conditions of contemporary South African townships are not merely a matter of politics or economics but are the result of ideologies held by the ruling classes that have been actively constructed and maintained through discursive and representational practices. Addressing these practices is a central component of decolonization, which entails dismantling the geographical, economic, and ideological structures that perpetuate inequality.

Yet the deficit of published literature in Black villages and townships doesn’t represent the full picture. Oral literature offers a particularly valuable mode of addressing the

shortfalls of the mainstream publishing industry and offers a means of making literature widely available in vernacular languages to people who lack access to books. As well as representing the lower income classes that are mainly responsible for producing it, oral literary forms are a vibrant and living component of the cultural heritage of South Africa whose value and artistry is often overlooked by cultures that “lay stress on the idea of literacy and written tradition” (Finnegan 1976, 1). In speaking with practicing iimbongi and members of their audiences, I found that despite the massive political and social upheaval that has defined South Africa over the past half century, the oral literary practice of the iimbongi and the ritual aspect of their izibongo genre remain alive and well in rural communities of the Eastern Cape and, to a lesser extent, in township communities as well. Iimbongi are not numerous, but a widespread respect for these figures and their literary tradition exists among the general public in the Eastern Cape. In both of my study areas, iimbongi continue a poetic practice that, in many respects, remains similar to that described in accounts by the first European travellers to the area (Opland 1983). In my interviews with community members in Willowvale and Grahamstown, participants were nearly unanimous in their approval of and support for the tradition, which they considered very important to their communities and their cultural identity. Participants felt that iimbongi encourage mutual support among community members, remind people of the beauty of their language and heritage, act as spiritual healers, and serve as upstanding role models for the youth in their communities.

These findings differed somewhat from those of previous scholars. As well as writing extensively on the content, style, and structure of the izibongo genre (e.g., Opland 1996, 1998, 1983, Kaschula 2002), scholars have emphasized its role in social commentary and political critique (Kaschula 1991a, Kaschula and Diop 2000, d'Abdon 2015, Sitas 2012, Neser 2011). My interviews did not find the same emphasis in today's very different political

context. Similarly, my findings on the spiritual importance of imbongi differs from the work of previous scholars. Much has been written on amagqirha, traditional healers in the amaXhosa tradition, and associated spiritualities (e.g., Hirst 2005, Booie and Edwards 2015, Mabona 2004). Yet apart from Opland's (1983) work, I have found no research that offers a substantial discussion of the relationship between these two vocations, despite the fact that during my interviews both iimbongi and their audiences repeatedly noted the connection and discussed its importance. This scholarly omission may be due in part to a perception that "izibongo has lost its ritual connotation" (Opland 1983, 270). However, my research found that this perception does not accurately reflect community sentiment. Although the tradition is diverse and changing, the spiritual aspect of iimbongi and their literature was clearly of deep importance to participants, many of whom acknowledged the imbongi's connection to amagqirha (singular: igqirha), spiritual healers. In honouring their ancestral obligations, iimbongi play a healing and empowering role in communities, offering a route to improved development outcomes through the active affirmation of Indigenous agency, language, and identity.

As performers, iimbongi have the power to move and inspire audiences through their skillful and eloquent use of the isiXhosa language, through the particular message that their oratory contains, and through the power vested in the poetry by the imbongi's spiritual vocation (Opland 1983). Like all creative arts, the imbongi's literature flows from an unknown source; iimbongi are inspired by umoya, a holy or ancestral spirit, and their spontaneous compositions are held to be capable of prophecy, even of making things happen (Opland 1983, Furniss and Gunner 1995). Thus, although imbongi are familiar and well-liked figures, they may also have an aura of mystery and the occult, not least because of their connection to the amathwasa (singular: ithwasa), a class of spiritual figures that includes

amagqirha (traditional healers or witchdoctors) and other diviners and herbalists. The political role that has been so emphasized by scholars does remain a part of contemporary practice, but is not the aspect of contemporary iimbongi and their literature most emphasized by either iimbongi or their audiences.

In this chapter, I consider elements of the iimbongi tradition that have received little attention, particularly in recent years: their ritual or spiritual significance and the role of both iimbongi and their literature in social development and decolonization in contemporary South Africa. I show how the on-going practice of spiritually rich literature has a profound effect on audiences, contributing directly to people's spiritual and emotional wellbeing and the advancement of social development of their communities. In particular, I argue that the iimbongi's spiritually significant literature affirms Black agency, creativity, autonomy, and vision, helping effect a shift from a development paradigm based on economic growth to a more holistic paradigm that considers a full spectrum of human endeavour and wellbeing. Finally, I look to my interviews with community members to show how, despite the limitations imposed by current political and economic conditions, contemporary iimbongi play a vital social and cultural role. By acting as spiritual healers and by invigorating pride in Indigenous language and heritage, iimbongi have much to offer to communities struggling through the difficult debris of a post-apartheid society.

Community and literature in the Eastern Cape

The various aspects and associations of the iimbongi's oratory combine to give their words an energizing and transformative power that offers hope not only to the oppressed populace of the Eastern Cape but to development theorists and practitioners as well: "One of the most important effects of the kind of address that defines praise poetry lies in the audience's

re-imagination of itself in terms of historical and potential identities, as well as in relation to other communities. It is this facet of the form that gives it both its affirmative potentials and its transformative capacities” (Neser 2011, 14).

The concept of ‘development’ and its counterpart ‘underdevelopment’ emerged from the modernization paradigm of the 1940s and 50s that held that “only through material advancement could social, cultural and political progress be achieved” (Escobar 1995). Material advancement was seen to be reliant on economic growth, which in turn required developing the agricultural and industrial sectors and other economic drivers from which further benefits would flow. In the decades since, despite ostensibly progressive rhetoric of inclusion and participation, mainstream development policies have remained “little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed primarily to serve the economic and political interests of the West” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 27). This is particularly true in the current climate of globalized neoliberal capitalism, where an emphasis on economic growth “has replaced ‘development’, whose human, social or sustainable connotations have become too much of a burden” (Rist 2008, viii). Yet, as we have seen, economic growth does not reduce inequality, it exacerbates it (Harvey 2007, Smith 2008, Biel 2000), leading to the sort of economic polarization that is particularly evident in South Africa. A growth-based model of development is therefore self-defeating, since “poverty is not a disease of capitalism of which it might one day be cured, but on the contrary stimulates accumulation and therefore represents a sign of good health within the existing system” (Rist 2008, 258). Unfortunately, the growth-based development model is a difficult one to shift because development discourse, which determines the rules of engagement for development policy, is saturated with this ideology and reproduces its logic. This discourse continues to construct the third world as “perverse, abnormal and passive” with limited cultural and

artistic complexity relative to the accomplished West (Kapoor 2015, see also Escobar 1995). For these reasons, Huggan and Tiffin (2010) call for a critical examination of the development field, stating that, “One of the central tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism as an emergent field has been to contest—also to provide viable alternatives to—western ideologies of development” (27).

Part of this contestation involves the recognition that development policy is not culturally neutral but rather involves systems of language and representation throughout the process of policy formulation (Kapoor 2008). Overall, development is a set of managerial practices aimed at improving the living conditions of people around the world in accordance with the norms and values of the industrialized West. Its discourses advance the notion that ‘culture’ is “a ‘luxury’ to be indulged only by wealthy, post-materialist societies. The implication most often is that development policy needs to prioritize economic growth and, based on the West’s industrialization experiences, recommend strategies that help fulfil people’s material needs first. Culture, then, is to be put aside until such time as developing countries can pay for it” (Kapoor 2008, 19). The problematic presumption that a growth-based development policy is a necessary precondition for human wellbeing is a hallmark of Western ideology that views culture and spirituality as subsidiary to material needs. Yet as industrialized nations have shown, there is no point along a continuum of human development at which the process of capital accumulation is sated, enabling society to give itself over to more humanistic endeavours (Mies 1998). Instead, a society which accepts the cultural and spiritual poverty of the capitalist project and develops according to its dictates is destined to internalize these values, becoming a stunted social system in which the accumulation of capital becomes the organizing principle for both public and private life. As an enterprise whose primary objective is the expansion of the capitalistic mode of thinking

that it is embedded within and reproduces, the process of development is inevitably constrained by its ends, i.e., the advancement of material and economic wellbeing along a linear trajectory determined by a narrow set of western interests. For development to produce holistic advancements in human wellbeing, rural, non-industrial and otherwise “underdeveloped” societies must be respected for the complex organisms that they are, which means recognizing the existence of a full range of humanistic practices that are at least as well-developed and as central to public life as those of the West.

In this, iimbongi present a radical rebuttal to the discursive practices of capitalist society and the development models that emanate from it. Over the past two centuries for which documentation is available, iimbongi have actively engaged with tribal and colonial politics, voicing a sustained, emphatic critique of the dispossession, segregation, corruption, racial, and economic injustice that have impinged so catastrophically on the development prospects of African peoples. In the contemporary context, they continue to assert the value of African lifeways, worldviews, and cultural values. Thus, even where iimbongi do not directly dispute western hegemonies and imperialist practices, they destabilize capitalist ideologies and help shift the discursive space by actively asserting alternatives. Speaking from the margins, iimbongi articulate a radical and non-assimilationist politics that places African literature and spirituality front and centre, asserting the wisdom and power of some of society’s most marginal classes. Unlike many westerners, iimbongi have no doubts about the cultural sophistication of their audiences, whom they know to be appreciative of the complex and densely metaphorical genre of izibongo. They simultaneously demonstrate and exercise the critical intelligence of their listeners, calling on people to remember and cherish African heritage and language and to undertake those development initiatives that are relevant to listeners’ own lives and situations. Through their poetry, iimbongi challenge the

pernicious notion that rural, poor, or otherwise marginal peoples are without literature or have suffered the loss of their cultures and traditions. On the contrary: iimbongi and their enthusiastic audiences proudly uphold cultural practices, literatures, and spiritualities that are very much alive, despite their marginalization and erasure since colonial times.

Iimbongi in contemporary life: responses from the communities

In my interviews with community members in the villages around Willowvale, I was immediately struck by the participants' ubiquitous knowledge of the iimbongi tradition and their shared sense of its importance. Asked whether the iimbongi remains an important tradition, participants were unanimous: "Kakhulu!" Very important. Praise of the iimbongi was emphatic: "We love iimbongi," participants told me, "Iimbongi make us happy." At the same time, participants conceded that iimbongi were uncommon and opportunities to see them perform were rare. Several participants, while appreciative of the tradition, had only attended performances by iimbongi a few times in their lives.

In the township, responses were more subdued. Numerous participants were ambivalent about the tradition while others voiced a strong sense of identification with it. Most participants spoke of having seen iimbongi on television (for example during Nelson Mandela's funeral or the annual State of the Nation Address), however several participants had only ever seen iimbongi on television, never in live performance. As in the rural areas, participants in the township felt that iimbongi were generally scarce and that there were few opportunities to see them perform. However, as in the rural setting, an appreciation of iimbongi was nearly universal among those familiar with the tradition. Many people expressed a desire for more opportunities to see live performances by iimbongi and felt that these opportunities would be beneficial for their community.

Despite the emphasis on the imbongi's political role throughout scholarship on the topic, most participants did not consider this an important aspect of the art form. In the rural Transkei, with its enduring kingdoms and chieftainships, people associated iimbongi with traditional leadership yet it is notable that they did not consider this affiliation "political." Instead, they distinguished between an imbongi's role in traditional, hereditary leadership and the contemporary incorporation of iimbongi into the realm of western-style party politics. Township participants understood that the imbongi they saw performing at televised political events, such as Nelson Mandela's inauguration and funeral or the State of the Nation Address, were paid by politicians in order to "cultivate an atmosphere" to sway the audience and help advance the political agenda of their patrons. At the same time, participants expressed a general appreciation for these performances. Zolani Mkiva was widely known by participants, who seemed to regard him as a combination of celebrity and folk hero. It was clear from the responses that iimbongi are much more to people than mere television celebrities or political puppets. The presence of iimbongi at televised events was culturally significant, but even more significant was the opportunity to view performances of iimbongi in person, which had a greater effect on audiences. As one participant explained:

Sometimes when there's some rallies and stuff like that they are invited. And they comment on what is happening in South Africa but they can pinpoint some stuff which government is doing. And that message is now spread easily because it's coming from mouth to the ears. In front of what someone is saying, delivered straight to the live audience. So I can think that can play a very, very important role. Because if you can hear something from the radio or from TV, there's some chances that you might forgot. But then when you get it from the horse's mouth,

then you picturize that person, that costume that he was wearing, that event. Then you build it into yourself and you can pinpoint some items or some message.

Overall, my interviews with iimbongi and their audiences confirmed that a widespread awareness of and respect for the imbongi tradition exists among the general amaXhosa public in the Eastern Cape. The interviews also showed that within the shifting culture of the Eastern Cape, shaped and informed as it is by both Western and Indigenous influences, the tradition of the imbongi is neither static nor uniform. While iimbongi are often conceived as spiritual figures, spiritual understandings of iimbongi vary widely from one context to the next and from one individual to another. However, most participants recognized iimbongi as gifted individuals who “have got a message” and whose talent for language enables them to convey that message through spontaneous and deeply affecting oral performances at public gatherings ranging from meetings to funerals to royal ceremonies. As Fundiswa,²⁵ a twenty-eight-year-old woman in Willowvale, expressed it,

Imbongi, Emily, it’s a calling. You have to understand it like that. Not just anyone can be imbongi. It is a calling, it’s a gift. First and foremost, it’s a calling. You don’t just become imbongi, you have to be gifted first. How they do it, Emily, maybe there is a ceremony somewhere and then they feel something when they’re there, they feel— I don’t know how they feel, but there is a feeling that they feel, and then they just burst out and say those things. Maybe there’s a celebration, maybe there’s a wedding then they just burst up and then they’re calling those names, I don’t know how to call them. But it’s not something you can

²⁵ A pseudonym.

go to school and study for. It's not something you can learn from uNontlantla. It is something you are gifted, you are skilled to do. And the way the way they use the words, if they pick up Q then they only use Q for like maybe ten words with Q.²⁶ Like q-q-q-q. You see those words. So it is a skill. It comes with passion. You don't just do it.

There are a lot of different types of imbongis. There is imbongi zomthonyama, there is imbongi yosiba.²⁷ The umthonyama is the one that just blasts out, and then the one of usiba, imbongi yosiba, is the one who writes down. So there are two different, two different types.

A forty-six-year-old man from the Joza township corroborated this opinion and extended it further, stating:

Imbongi, I think it's someone who's been sent by the ancestors, if I may say so. To pass the message, the prophet, you know. They're kind of gifted. [There are] different kinds of imbongis. There is imbongi zomthonyama, which is an imbongi that was appointed by the ancestors which is not writing his or her message but it just comes spiritually. And when it's ready to burst, even if there's a ritual then he or she can just come up and say things. That's imbongi zomthonyama.

Like most participants, both of these people distinguished between two types of iimbongi: iimbongi zomthonyama are spiritually motivated and compose their oral poems spontaneously according to amaXhosa custom; iimbongi yosiba, on the other hand, write their poetry according to western convention during periods of quiet or solitary reflection. Contemporary performers, often using rap, hip hop or slam poetry styles, may combine oral

²⁶ Q represents a palatal click; a strong, alliterative consonant.

²⁷ Usiba: pen [literally, feather]. Yosiba: Of the pen.

and written methods and may even adopt the title of imbongi.²⁸ However, the distinction is important: iimbongi zomthonyama are still widely recognized as being gifted and prophetic individuals with connections to the ancestral spirits. Rather than writing or memorizing poems ahead of time, they burst forth with a message composed on the spot.

Prophets and healers

The ritual aspect is reflected in the “zonthonyama” appellation. Historically, cattle and their enclosures (kraals) are particularly sacred spaces for amaXhosa and elaborate patterns of behaviour governed human interactions with them. Umthonyama refers to sacred centre of the kraal where the household patriarch is buried, making the kraal the abode of the patriarch and his ancestors as well as of the living cattle who are closely associated with them (Opland 1983, Mpupha 2016). Ritual sacrifices that take place in this kraal traditionally involve “the recitation of the lineage and clan poems” that are “the medium of communication with the ancestors” (Opland 1983, 126). The slaughtered beast itself provides a further channel of communication; its bellow affirms the presence of the ancestors, while its movement between life and death during the ceremony links the world of the living with that of the ancestral shades (Opland 1983, 130).

²⁸ These visible and popular performers are sometimes referred to as zimbongi zanamhlange, “iimbongi of today.”

Figure 3. Nguni cattle in their kraal



Iimbongi also spoke about this feature of their art, which is linked both to the spontaneous composition of the verse and to the communal aspect of its content, which expresses ties to lineage, homeland, clan, and community. As previous scholars have reported (e.g., Kaschula and Mostert 2009, Opland 2005), contemporary izibongo draw on the genealogies, features, and accomplishments of key figures present at an event. Whether or not iimbongi are requested to perform ahead of time, their poems are specific to the particular occasions at which they are performed and their words may form part of the sacred meaning of the event. In Thokozani Ntshunsha's words, "You cannot just be imbongi, because imbongi is not a writer like a poet. It's just someone who is having his own, no not own, but the ancestors, I can say, that are talking with him, understand?" Similarly, Grahamstown imbongi Dumisa Mpupha stated,

For me [an imbongi is] someone who is being inspired by the spirit to say something or to advise people about something [...] Most of us as imbongis will see things before people can see them. Myself, I would say that iimbongi are the sons and daughters of the amagqirha. Because of the way they speak or because of the way they utter their lyrics, they resemble the amagqirha. Because the imbongi, the traditional praise singers, the imbongi zomthonyama—the amagqirha they take the inspiration from the place that the imbongis take theirs. The spirit is more or less the same between the amagqirhas and the imbongis.

(Mpupha 2016)

This prophetic aspect of iimbongi is seen as part of their vocation and function, with evidence of their prophetic ability inextricable from their poetic talent. Ntshuntsha remarked, “I remember there is a poet that is called Mqhayi, in South Africa. S.E.K. Mqhayi was a good imbongi because many things that he has said they happened. You understand? They happened.”

Lay participants also commented on the importance of the prophetic aspect of iimbongi, with one man remarking, “And what they’re saying, especially the one from the ancestors, he can foresee things from away, kind of prophet, and warn if there is a kind of something bad or misfortune that is coming your way.” Others echoed the connection between iimbongi and traditional healers: “They’re kind of igqirhas, you know. Because igqirhas they can come and just sing, sing, sing. When that spirit comes it can just tell you something without expecting something from you.”

Thus, similar to amagqirha, iimbongi zomthonyama are recognized by many participants as having the talent that they do as a result of the spiritual calling common to the

amathwasa, who are called by the ancestors to perform a guiding and healing function in their communities. Individuals called to serve as amagqirha generally recognize their calling by the appearance of certain conditions symptomatic of ukuthwasa, meaning “to emerge or become new, as of the moon” (Mabona 2004). Ukuthwasa first manifests as a litany of mysterious and untreatable afflictions along with vivid dreams that may include images of ancestors or symbolic animals (Booi and Edwards 2015, Hirst 2005). During this process of emergence, an individual is entered by ancestral or other spirits that interfere with the candidate’s mental and physical processes, making him or her sensitive to the ancestral call (Mabona 2004, 327). An individual who accepts this call undertakes a lengthy initiation that results in their personal spiritual transformation. This involves moving through a period of severe physical and psychic distress or disarray under the guidance of a fully-initiated mentor, who facilitates the emergence of the new personality (Mabona 2004). The inthwaso process, literally “spiritual emergence,” culminates in the consecration of the new diviner and their calling through the ritual slaughter of a goat or a head of cattle. Once an igqirha is fully initiated, he or she is relieved of their afflictions and is henceforth able to maintain close communication with ancestral spirits. Thanks to the continual guidance of these spirits, igqirha are able to “provide for the spiritual wellbeing of the community” (Mabona 2004, 379). The physical and psychological wellbeing of amagqirha thus depends on their ability to recognize and accept their vocation, and to progress through the various stages necessary to become fully initiated into their vocation.

A similar process may be experienced by iimbongi who feel themselves called to ukuthwasa. As with amagqirha, a network of associations links iimbongi to the ancestral spirits; the special skill of both diviners and iimbongi lies in their ability to perceive and articulate these hidden connections, which is part of their healing arts (Booi and Edwards

2015). The igqirha's initiation process can place a heavy economic burden on families in the form of practitioner fees to the initiate's mentor and the cost of hosting the culminating ceremony with its ritual sacrifice of a goat or head of cattle (Hirst 2005). The practice of the imbongi is a way for those called to ukuthwasa to fulfill a measure of their spiritual vocation without incurring these costs, as no mentorship period or ritual sacrifice is required.

Certainly, even imbongi practicing in the zomthonyama style may choose not to emphasize or participate in the spiritual or ritual connotations of their practice. These iimbongi may simply enjoy literature and traditional performance and find that they have a certain talent for these arts. In addition, Christianity is widespread in the Eastern Cape and many iimbongi and audience members are devout Christians who, in accepting the ritual significance of the practice, are forced to reconcile the two systems of belief. For example, Thokozani Ntshuntsha remarked on the tension between Christian doctrine and ancestral spiritualities, stating,

I'm believing in Christianity, you understand? I'm believing in Christ.

But in my life when I grew up I didn't believe that I could be what I am now. Like for instance to be a poet and to be what I am now. You understand? Because there was a saying that if you are a Christian you cannot respect your forefathers and all that stuff, you understand? But when they come, those words, it's not easy. It's not easy. You cannot just ignore it. It's a sharp voice and I need to be aware of everything.

(Ntshuntsha 2015)

Although some Christian sects in South Africa have incorporated traditional beliefs, others insist on closer adherence to particular readings of the scriptures, which can lead to spiritual conflict for those who feel the pull of ukuthwasa while holding strong Christian

beliefs. Several iimbongi I spoke with stated that their talent was God-given in a Christian sense; another devoutly Christian imbongi explained that although his talent arrived through a process of ukuthwasa, the vocation must be a result of God's wishes. These Christian iimbongi, acting in the service of God, prayed to God for inspiration and guidance, yet accepted their talent and the demands and compromises it imposed on their lives.

The imbongi's acknowledged affiliation with the amathwasa confers certain privileges. As messengers chosen by the ancestors, the amathwasa have a spiritual vocation and obligation to both receive and transmit information between the earthly and spiritual realms. In this capacity, iimbongi serve their communities both as literary intellectuals and as prophetic visionaries. Mabona notes that "Authority and power is, in Xhosa traditional society, held and exercised in fealty to the ancestors. Both the chief and the diviner in the exercise of their duties profess allegiance to the ancestors. [...] Chiefs hold authority from the ancestors by right of lineage, whereas diviners obtain their legitimacy through a special vocation" (Mabona 2004, 314-15). Like diviners, the ancestral vocation of iimbongi endows them with a particular right to speech. Regardless of whether an imbongi's oratory has been prearranged or not, it remains a respected part of the proceedings at public events.

The compulsion to speak often exists as a physical force within imbongi that must be respected. Dumisa Mpupha, for example, reported that iimbongi prevented from speaking have been known to collapse. Ntshuntsha reported that, "I hear voices in my body that tell me what to say." Later in our conversation he explained,

Ntshuntsha: You'll find that some other poets, you'll find that these ones are just like sick because this message is supposed to be delivered to the people. Because you cannot *stop* them. You cannot stop them. Someone can just, maybe if on the stage can just jump. Understand?

McGiffin: He'll find a way to communicate the message.

Ntshuntsha: [affirming] Communicate the message. Try to talk with the people. No matter you give them the mic, no matter you don't give them the mic.

As in former times, iimbongi perform at public gatherings and official functions where they may spontaneously interrupt the proceedings with their impromptu verse. Although this practice is less common in modern society where meetings and gatherings are by and large organized in accordance with western notions of time, participants maintained that iimbongi are moved by forces beyond themselves and have licence to speak out; the audience is compelled to listen.

In accordance with the spiritual tradition in which ancestors are invited to be present at gatherings of a lineage or clan through ritual and oratory, the imbongi both invokes and attends to this ancestral presence (Opland 1983, 127, Ainslie 2014). As one participant expressed it, "If the initiation ceremony is performed by a certain clan, for example the Jorha clan, then the imbongi will talk about the Jorha clan, the history of that family line, that lineage, creating that atmosphere. Because there's a strong belief in Xhosa that wherever they perform, any traditional ceremonies, the ancestors are here. So introducing them properly and using imbongi is the accepted way in Xhosa." Or, as Opland explains,

The recitation of the izibongo of a living man, incorporating as it does the names of its subject and reference to his lineage or clan ancestry, conjures the presence of his ancestors and ensures their sympathetic attention to his affairs. [...] The chief's ancestral spirits, invoked through the imbongi's izibongo, will attend sympathetically to the well-being of the ruling chief, and thereby, since the chief is the chiefdom,

the imbongi ensures the well-being of all the members of the chiefdom.

(Opland 1983, 131)

Healing poetic practice and community wellbeing

This ritual function was demonstrated during an invitational event I attended in December 2015 at King Zwelonke's Great Place at Nqadu, some twenty kilometres from Idutywa in the Mbashe municipality. The event—the launch of a holiday season anti-drinking campaign by the Eastern Cape Liquor Board—was attended by one or two hundred people from the region and involved a series of speeches and performances by traditional leaders, government officials, dance troupes, the Eastern Cape Liquor Board, and South Africa Breweries. Official speeches alternated with music, dance, and spoken word performances, making for a lively, interesting, and fairly informal event that lasted about three hours and concluded with an ample lunch.

According to custom, the King was the final speaker on the program. As he rose to the podium, Thukela Poswayo, the imbongi designated to perform before him, took the microphone and stood on the grass below facing the King directly. Poswayo began mildly, the volume and emphasis of his speech building to a crescendo over the course of a five-minute performance that finished rousingly to the applause and ululations of the gathered crowd. Lacking the trappings common to other iimbongi (porcupine quills, skins, assegai, etc.), Poswayo cut a modest figure in a simple button-down shirt, black dress pants, and polished shoes. He was empty-handed, with no skins, beads or head covering, and lacked the booming, guttural roar common to many iimbongi. Standing almost motionless throughout his poem, his performance style was minimalist. Yet this very simplicity clearly conveyed a

sense of gathered strength and composure. Overall, he gave an impression of challenging or provoking the King, riling him to a more vigorous or impassioned address.

The transcription and translation of Poswayo's poem confirmed a confident eloquence that calls on the king to show leadership in both speech and action, to act boldly and generously to help heal a damaged nation and, through words and deeds, inspire others to do likewise. The full poem is included in Appendix II.

Ewe kaloku ndibiza ngabom.	Yes, now I name them deliberately.
Ngoba kaloku ukuze kulunge	So that all may go well
Ndithi Zwelonke	I say Zwelonke;
Funeka ndiyibiz'imilambo ye Afrika.	I must name the rivers of Africa.
[...]	[...]
Thetha ke! Nasi isizwe sakokwenu	Speak then! Here is your nation.
Nang'amaGcaleka ka Khawuta.	Here are the Gcalekas of Khawuta. ²⁹
Nalusapho luka Zanzolo.	Here are the children of Zanzolo.
Nal'usapho luka Sarhili.	Here are the children of Sarhili. ³⁰
Thetha ke nalo	So speak to them.
Ngoba kaloku okwakh'ukuthetha	For certainly your words
Ngekhe kulambathe	Will not be in vain
Ngoba kaloku uThix'uMdali, uQamata	Just as God the creator, Qamata ³¹
Woobawo mkhulu,	Of our forefathers,
Wakhomba ngomnwe wakhe	Pointed with his finger,
Wakhomb'indoda'emayi khokel'amanye amadoda,	Choosing a man to lead others,
Ke ngelakh'ilizwi uyakubeka indlebe.	So to your voice he turns his ear.
Aphulaphule enze kulunge kokwethu.	Listen well! And make things right for us.

Here Poswayo invokes ancestral presences by speaking the names of Zanzolo and Sarhili, helping to ensure their "protective sympathy" (Opland 1983, 264). Throughout the performance, he entreats the King to speak wisely and judiciously, to lead his people with the strength and inspiration of his words as much as through his actions. He acknowledges the

²⁹ Khawuta: The father of the ancestor Gcaleka, for whom an amaXhosa kingdom is named.

³⁰ Sarhili: Son of Hintsu and a major figure in amaXhosa history.

³¹ Qamata: The Nguni god (whereas the Christian god is uThixo).

hereditary authority of King Zwelonke, affirming the responsibility and obligations that come with it, yet also articulates the King's place within a broader lineage and a social and spiritual assemblage to which he has significant responsibilities. The imbongi here is tasked with giving the king the courage to speak, to deliver a steadfast and inspiring message to the people. In this poem, the power of the King's speech is clearly profound: uQamata himself is keen to listen.

Unlike amagqirha, whose healing practice consists of private consultations with afflicted individuals, iimbongi are public performers whose role involves tapping into the collective sentiment of their audiences, both living and spiritual. They perform a public service with social responsibilities that include "healing people through words" and addressing community issues through their praising. Like Poswayo, Mandlenkosi Dyakala, a young imbongi who grew up in the rural community of Salem and now practices in Grahamstown, understands the ritual aspect of his artistic practice and has immense respect for the tradition he is part of. As he explained through an interpreter:

Usually traditional healers, what they do is just heal you on the sickness that you have. But traditional praiser, their form of medicine is their mouth, their words. When they give out the words, what they say, it's a form of a spirit, it's a form of uplifting someone. [...] Because he's using his voice to heal. What happens, for example, if there's a ceremony we're sitting there. We're just sitting, chilling, chatting. He just gets up—because he still just comes at any time—he gets up and then when he praises you will see some people coming with tears, because of what he's saying it goes through some other people's hearts. So he's a form of healer but using his voice.

Three hundred kilometres away in Willowvale, Thokozani Ntshuntsha expressed the same sentiment:

You know what, we have responsibility to heal people through words. We have that responsibility. We as iimbongi, although we deliver the message to people, people must be aware that some of the words that are coming from us are not coming from us. They are coming from somewhere else. No matter it's God but there's someone who's driving the poet to speak. You understand? I mean, there's emotion, or else I don't know. So we're having that responsibility to take care of people.

Within township and rural environments alike, the need for healing is profound. Generations of exclusion and deprivation and the contemporary economic reality of mass poverty, unemployment, and low levels of education have wrought harrowing social damage (Desai 2002, Wood and Jewkes 2005). One Willowvale participant, a seventy-four-year-old pensioner and church leader, claimed that iimbongi are important to the community in their ability to help prevent crime by swaying the minds of would-be criminals away from misdeeds. He also discussed the role of iimbongi in promoting the unity of families:

When the family gets together to celebrate as a family, the imbongi is needed. He will praise and guide to dignify the ceremony. For example, my father's family, he's a headman.³² If he's with his family, they won't give him praises but when the imbongi speaks, that will help remind the people about their customs.

The rural Transkei, with its generations of familial upheaval and division, surely benefits from the unifying spirit of the imbongi. Yet rural and township areas alike suffer

³² Headman: Leader of a village, a hereditary position.

from a shortage of imbongi to perform this healing work, their absence going hand in hand with a shift away from traditions that had been common in rural areas in recent memory. The following exchange with Fundiswa, the twenty-eight-year old woman in Willowvale, revealed a sense of regret that her community's traditions are not as present in her life as she would like, and an awareness of the particular constraints faced by rural people—including poverty, isolation and inadequate transport—that added to the difficulty of practicing those traditions.

McGiffin: And so what is the role of the imbongi, in the community?

Fundiswa: In such events, the role of imbongi in certain events is to make people laugh, is to enjoy the actual event, is to add— is to spice up the event, just to make it sparkly. If maybe people were dull and then there comes imbongi doing their thing, and you're like this [asleep], you wake up and you enjoy the actual event. How they do it, it's very interesting. So I can say, in the community they play a big role. They bring people together. [...] In the community it's good. It's good to see the skill of a person being displayed in front of you and this person didn't even plan this. And then he just comes up and burst and says those words. And make people laugh. They play a big role.

McGiffin: Do you have a lot of imbongi around?

Fundiswa: We do, Emily, we do have. Because... I don't want to say we don't have. The fact that we cannot see them is because we don't have much events and it's because people they don't have that self-confidence to do such things. They become afraid. I think if they can be exposed to the idea of being imbongi and become confident, then

we will know who is imbongi in our communities. Just that some of them they do have that but they don't want to express it. Because they are not exposed to the idea. We only know uZolani Mkiva, we only know a few of iimbongi. That's the thing about rural areas, we are not exposed to such things. That's why such talents we cannot identify in our communities. Otherwise we do have imbongis.

McGiffin: Do you think it was different in the past? Has the tradition changed or were there more...?

Fundiswa: It has changed a lot. It has changed a lot, Emily. Back in the day, if I remember correctly, here there was, at this time of the year, everyone in their garden they have vegetables, they have maize and there were all the traditional, what do you call, the ceremonies. Like imithombo, like iBoers, like intonjane, all those things. But now today because we're becoming modern, people they don't do those things anymore. So I think maybe because of the time, it has lapsed or something, I don't know. But it's different nowadays. I don't know whether maybe the technology has taken over or what is happening. Or people they've forgotten where they are coming from. Because it can be like that. People have forgotten how we celebrated being in the rural area and how to make fun within ourselves. Everything has changed now. I think maybe the technology has taken over, and then we have been blind, because we have to remain ourselves even if the technology is becoming more, but we have to remain ourselves.

McGiffin: So it sounds like the iimbongi kind of went hand in hand with the community events and you see less events so you see less iimbongi and both of those things would have brought people together more.

Fundiswa: Yes, yes, yes. It's few nowadays. It's very few.

McGiffin: So do you see that having an effect on the community?

Fundiswa: Everything has affected the community. Everything my dear. People they don't know where to belong, they don't know how to adjust to such events. For instance, we've got crisis of drought. People, they don't know how to adjust on that one. Bear in mind, if there's a drought in South Africa, the food, the cost, is gonna be high. Now, everyone must plough whatever works within the certain weather. For instance, potatoes they don't use much rain. Why don't we plough potatoes, so that we feed ourselves? The value of food is gonna be high, because of drought, so my point— what I'm trying to say is people, they fail to adjust in new circumstances, in new occasions. So, to go back to your question, I don't know how people think anymore. They are too dependent, not independent, they are too dependent on the government. They don't want to think. At all. They don't want to share their ideas.

According to this woman, iimbongi, in adding a tone of humour and levity to community gatherings, instil in their audiences a sense of joy in being together and an enjoyment of one another and the occasion they are taking part in. They are known to offer messages clad in figurative language that makes people think, thus their very presence

catalyzes critical thought. The decline of community gatherings is coincident with a shortage of iimbongi who would promote a sense of unity and communal wellbeing. With fewer opportunities to come together, there are fewer opportunities to exchange ideas and share observations and insights on changing social and environmental conditions. This has potentially severe implications for the community's long-term wellbeing, as its very resiliency and ability to adapt to change is undermined. The unravelling of community cohesion threatens a loss of morale that the iimbongi could also offer an antidote to: "When someone has an iimbongi coming with those words, you will quickly know about who you are and you will be proud of what you are. You'll be not doubting about yourself. Especially in traditional program that we used to do. Because iimbongi just take you there. Just take you there" (Ntshuntsha 2015).

While the response of research participants to iimbongi and their performances was overwhelmingly positive, it would be simplistic to state that the tradition and its practice is always unequivocally good. As discussed in the previous chapter, oppressive political circumstances often prevent iimbongi from saying all that they would like to. Worse, they may use their platform to advocate xenophobia, gender oppression and other regressive politics. One iimbongi I interviewed was outspoken on a number of alarmingly conservative views, for example the notions that God had put people in different countries intending that they stay there and that society is undermined by women's failure to adhere to amaXhosa traditions. While all of the iimbongi I spoke with clearly acted with the best of intentions and most referenced the importance of prayer and spiritual purity, living as a upstanding citizen, and providing a role model in the community, these approaches are no guarantee of a liberal or egalitarian politics. On the contrary, iimbongi may act as vocal proponents of damaging or oppressive points of view. Given their widely-acknowledged poetic licence to speak their

minds and the weight and spiritual power of their words, there is clearly a potential for ignorance and abuse of power. The same spirit that roused Qabula's audiences in support of Fosatu's work to overthrow apartheid could be used to rouse audiences to rout foreign shopkeepers from the townships—a chilling thought indeed.

These dangers aside, participants felt that iimbongi perform an important healing role and voiced their belief in the value of the imbongi's performances to community upliftment, social cohesion, identity, and pride. In the fraught social environments of contemporary South African townships, "imbongi give people hope," as one young man explained. In the words of a middle-aged man, "Iimbongi, they revive a spirit of ubuntu."³³ "They'll teach you many things," said a twenty five-year-old woman, "How you can communicate with other people, how you can respect your culture, whether you are Black or White, rich or poor. To respect who you are." A twenty-six-year-old man claimed that there are many iimbongi around the Grahamstown area. Although he wasn't one of them, he liked to hear them, he "liked the sound." As he explained, "They heal us. Like when they talk isiXhosa, when they're rhyming their words, they bring us a knowledge that comes from them to us. And how they feel, their emotions. You know. All those kind of feelings, they actually write them down and talk about them."³⁴

This embodiment and expression of public emotion has a powerful effect on audiences. As Ndileka,³⁵ a thirty-year old woman explained:

Some people they get inspired by imbongi. They show those emotions in different ways. Sometimes people will actually applaud by some sort of cries out [i.e., ululations]. I'm sure you've heard that. And some

³³ Ubuntu: translates loosely as "humanity."

³⁴ Likely a reference to zimbongi zanamhlange.

³⁵ A pseudonym.

people actually will really be inspired to continue the legacy of their ancestors in terms of performing traditional rituals and ceremonies. [...] They give a lot of applaud to the imbongi and some people do actually cry. It actually makes them too emotional sometimes when the imbongi speaks.

One of the participants described the way the imbongi's emotionally-charged praises worked on her in this way:

Ndileka: It's so overwhelming hey? Because we're all happy. We'll look up and say wow! And they will clap their hands, they will be happy, you understand? Because he's praising that someone. He's praising you. Starting from your hair, the way your hair looks—nicely, in a Xhosa way. Starting from your face, the way you walk, the way you're touching things. It's so beautiful. Especially if you understand what the imbongi's saying.

McGiffin: And the language they use has an effect on people?

Ndileka: It do have because when they're speaking my language I feel like, wow! Because Xhosa's my mother tongue. [...] Like for instance, if you're saying you're walking, uyahamba, and then they will say "uyanawuka³⁶," which is the same thing as uyahamba. You see? So that's what I'm saying, it's a deep Xhosa that we can say like, "Wow! My Xhosa is a beautiful language."

³⁶ A hlonipha synonym.

Words, language, spirit

The beauty of the isiXhosa language is too seldom celebrated in a society dominated by its colonial language and lingua franca whose use and mastery is bound up in issues of class and economic security. The oppression of African languages since the arrival of Europeans in South Africa has actively discouraged native speakers from taking pride in the beauty and expressiveness of these languages, thwarting the development of vernacular literary cultures (Opland 1998, Kaschula 2008). As one participant commented, the persistent emphasis on English even in a liberated South Africa has resulted in a lack of appreciation of African languages and their development: “especially young people undermine their language. [They say,] ‘Ah, English is better!’”

Not only does the emphasis on English neglect the power and beauty of African languages, its profound implications for the cultural lives of the people has been recognized for generations: “Critically, the masses of common people, who don’t speak or read European languages, are excluded from the cultural and literary life of their country. Literature thus becomes a solely bourgeoisie activity, divorced from the daily life of common people” (Ngugi 1986). This exclusion, in turn, inhibits the development of a literary culture, both among readers and writers, who are often unable to communicate with the people they are writing for and about. For South African writer Thando Mqolonzana, current conditions are the result of a literary system that is quintessentially colonial. In 2015, his public refusal to attend either the Time of the Writer or Franschoek literary festivals went viral. As he explained during one media interview

We are talking about a system here. [...] One which I chose to define as the colonial literary system. There has never been a deliberate decolonial project. These things of freedom and democracy are not

decolonial in nature. So, we inherited a colonial literary system and did nothing about it for the past 20 years. I decided I was going to stop asking whiteness to take me more seriously to accommodate me better in their system because that's not what we need. We need two things. One being to crush the colonial system completely, because there is no improving colonialism and then imagine new things that are not framed by notions of colonialism. (Sosibo 2016)

During a visit to Grahamstown in February 2016 for the annual Puku Storytelling Festival, renowned South African author Sindiwe Magona expressed a similar decolonial politics, citing the title of W.B. Rubusana's classic historical account, *Zenk'inkomo magwalandini* (which translates loosely as "Defend your Heritage" and literally as "There go Your Cattle, you Cowards!"), as a battle cry. Referring to the willingness of Black South Africans to neglect or abandon their linguistic and cultural heritage, Magona stated, "The cattle aren't even being taken as spoils: they're being driven away." In the new South Africa, the Black majority government has proven anxious to embrace not only the neoliberal norms of the Western political economy, but also the West's hegemonic cultural institutions and expectations. Such an attitude is deeply associated with colonial and postcolonial spaces and perpetuates the oppression of the colonial era. As Albert Memmi describes:

Furthermore, the colonized's mother tongue, that which is sustained by his feelings, emotions and dreams, that in which his tenderness and wonder are expressed, thus that which holds the greatest emotional impact, is precisely the one which is the least valued. It has no stature in the country or in the concert of peoples. If he wants to obtain a job, make a place for himself, exist in the community and the world, he

must first bow to the language of his masters. In the linguistic conflict within the colonized, his mother tongue is that which is crushed. He himself sets about discarding this infirm language, hiding it from the sight of strangers. (Memmi 1967, 107).

There are eleven official languages in South Africa, including Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, Sesotho, siSwati, Tshivenda, xiTsonga, isiXhosa, and isiZulu, making the linguistic situation in the country far from simple. Yet rather than operating via a polyglot assemblage of African languages, throughout government and administrative bodies and educational institutions from the early primary level upward, the language of the old colonial masters reigns supreme. In promoting English and the cultural and political norms linked to it, the government has abandoned the ideological struggles of the past at yet another level, instead advancing the same consciousness and worldview that governed oppressive systems of the past. With English valued over their mother tongue, people are squeezed into the psychic and cultural realm of the colonizer and the cultural, economic, and political ontologies embedded within the colonial language.

In celebrating the beauty and expressiveness of their mother tongue, iimbongi help resist the cultural and linguistic hegemony that exists in South Africa. Like any poet, imbongi have the skill and task of making available to their audiences particular forms of the language that are seldom heard. As Ntshuntsha explains,

Ntshuntsha: The way that we have of using words in these ways is not like the Xhosa. [...] Like for instance when you're greeting someone in Xhosa you're saying "Molo!" na? Just general Xhosa. But before it was not molo, you were saying "Bodani!" Which is the deep Xhosa, you understand. So there are words that are special that poets use.

McGiffin: So maybe like an old-fashioned language?

Ntshunsha: Old fashioned kind of words. Amaqhalo, which is the metaphors. Izaci, which is figures of speech, whereby you cannot even understand sometimes the message but the message goes straight to you.

While traditional iimbongi generally perform almost exclusively in isiXhosa, the same is not true of performance poets more broadly, who often express the cultural hybridity of their contexts by mixing languages and performance forms. While such expressions of cultural hybridity are by no means lesser than the “deep Xhosa” of the traditional imbongi, there is value in the imbongi zonthonyama’s linguistic offering that has no equivalent in the world of hybrid performance art. Historically, iimbongi were instrumental to the development of the isiXhosa language and they continue to remind people of the beauty and complexity of its precolonial forms (Mpupha 2016). A thirty-five-year-old woman living in the township commented:

They’re doing it in English now. If they could do it in their vernacular language, I think it would be... And again, I don’t think they understand Xhosa like we do, hey? These young ones. Because you can take a Xhosa word but they won’t understand. Uthini’s this?³⁷ You understand. They don’t know that Xhosa Xhosa Xhosa. Even if you can go to Transkei, the Xhosa from Transkei and from here is so different. Because I’m coming from Transkei. The time I came here, everybody was like wow! What are you saying? You’re speaking Xhosa? But wow you’re Xhosa is so different! But as time goes on we adopt

³⁷ “What’s this?”

the Xhosa from this side and we're speaking like them now.

As this speaker points out, different dialects of isiXhosa are spoken from one region to another; township dialects can differ significantly from the dialect of rural areas even a short distance away. While Ntshuntsha may be comfortable using words that his audience is unfamiliar with, the same is not true of all iimbongi. Dyakala, who grew up in a rural community only a half hour from Grahamstown, explains,

Dyakala: When I'm in a rural area, it's easy to understand me, on what I'm saying. But here in the township some people do not understand me. "What he's trying to say? Ohhh, he's trying to say this thing." So when I'm praising in my rural area, I know that the people in the community understand me very well. But here in the location I have to change words in a polite way, just get people to understand.

McGiffin: In the rural areas do you use the deeper Xhosa?

Dyakala: [affirming] The deeper Xhosa. Here in the township I can't just get to the deeper Xhosa because they will not understand what I'm saying.

The iimbongi's "deep Xhosa" is archaic, poetic, and draws on a linguistic heritage that predates colonialism. The iimbongi's rich and figurative language, their use of ancient and often unfamiliar words, their culturally resonant metaphors and historical subjects, their forthright and deeply personal and relevant messages all serve to elevate the marginalized language and identity of millions of people trapped in the painful reality of neoliberal, post-apartheid space. In those spaces—dangerous, dilapidated, and sidelined by the middle and upper classes of South African society—iimbongi offer a glimpse of the natural world and a reminder of human connectedness to it. With their words, says Zwelitsha iimbongi Yakobi

Sixham, they offer affirmation of beauty in the world around them and hope of a brighter future ahead:

The way I see imbongi, my sister. Firstly, they are people who have visions and are very fond of nature. Everything in nature they love. If there are bushes maybe in December there are bushes with flowers, they like that. Including rivers, changing of seasons— people who are imbongis like that. Iimbongis are people who are useful to the community because if something good is happening in the community, you'll hear the imbongi. The imbongi will not keep quiet when there's something which is not right happening in the community like for example, let me say the community is affected by xenophobia, the imbongi cannot just keep quiet. The imbongi is supposed to stand up and say no, this xenophobia is wrong. If maybe there is a rainbow nation now in South Africa, imbongi is supposed to stand and say, "This is good."

Conclusion

My interviews suggested that spirituality plays a central role in contemporary izibongo and no doubt has done so historically as well. Nevertheless, with few exceptions, scholarly writing on isiXhosa literature in general and the imbongi's oratory in particular has marginalized or entirely overlooked the spiritual aspect of the art. Several scholars have emphasized the political role of poets and iimbongi, particularly through the medium of newspapers in the early twentieth century and during the late apartheid period, as discussed in Chapters Three and Four. The political situation in South Africa today is drastically

different from what it was during earlier periods, and the political role of the imbongi has necessarily shifted as well. Resistance movements are no longer oriented toward the specific enemy of the apartheid state, but are instead directed at the much more slippery and pernicious demons of inequality, underdevelopment, and ongoing racism. Literary resistance is made more difficult by the climate of censorship that has prevailed in the post-apartheid period, as discussed in Chapter Five. Furthermore, economic and social shifts—particularly related to the declining overall importance of the mining sector and rapid technological change—have resulted in increased urbanization, less oscillation between rural and urban areas, and altered relationships between these realms. For all of these reasons, although the imbongi does still appear to play a political role, my research suggests that, for most audiences, this is not the most important aspect of the imbongi tradition in contemporary times. Instead, people valued emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of the imbongi's performance: the tradition, identity, and language that iimbongi represent, their ability to entertain and liven an event, their connection to God and ancestors, and their ability to provoke reflection and critical thought.

At the same time, it is also clear that iimbongi, whether acting with good intentions or not, can also give voice to adverse sentiments that simmer within communities, whether xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, or other other conservative values. This is particularly true considering the argument that iimbongi act as mediators between communities and authority figures, voicing public sentiment and concerns. Just as iimbongi in the employ of politicians and corporations may have difficulty seeing or expressing truths that countervail the party line, so to are community-based iimbongi immersed in a social culture that they risk uncritically propagating and perpetuating. In this, iimbongi are no different from other artists; they are individual humans who generally act conscientiously within the constraints of

their own awareness and voice and are generally responsive to the tastes and sensibilities of their audiences. Some iimbongi will be inclined to sell their talents, many others will accept financial sacrifices in service of curiosity, creativity, expression and exploring the intricacies of human emotion and experience.

My interviews suggested that iimbongi as a whole took their responsibilities seriously and were driven not by self-interest but by their spiritual experiences and their desire to use their gifts to serve their communities. As spiritual figures accorded deep respect among their audiences, iimbongi hold a unique and underappreciated potential to share knowledge and history with their audiences, and to inspire the pride, hope, and humanity that are requisite components of meaningful development and progressive social and political change. In addition, iimbongi and their art offer an example of an alternative means by which development practitioners can begin to access Indigenous perspectives of the histories and priorities of their communities. Thus, despite their current marginalization and scarcity, iimbongi remain a relevant and respected source of knowledge and cultural production that can help heal the lasting psychic trauma wrought by colonialism, apartheid, and contemporary crime and unrest. Iimbongi unsettle neocolonial paradigms that view development as a product to be delivered to the poor by an educated and articulate class of professionals. Rather than offering pre-packaged or transferrable solutions, their spontaneous poetry is influenced by and reflective of the particularities of place, occasion, and circumstance, with messages tailor-made for the context in which they find themselves. In contrast to the spiritual poverty of industrialized society, iimbongi speak about human actions, feelings and ideas within individual communities and call on listeners within those communities to draw on their ancestral strengths in becoming all that they can be.

In light of these arguments, it is vital that the autonomy and agency expressed through spiritual and creative arts be given greater consideration in development policies and practices. “Alternative representational genres,” such as the imbongi’s poetry, offer diverse perspectives and insights, illuminating broad historical, cultural, and environmental complexities that other research methodologies and associated literature may fail to capture (Lewis, Rodgers, and Woolcock 2008). Appreciation of the role of literature and the arts in scholarly knowledge production is growing, leading many researchers to embrace it as a way of gaining more nuanced understandings of social dynamics and suitable policy responses (Nyamnjoh 2013, Sylvester 2000, Lewis, Rodgers, and Woolcock 2014). In South Africa’s post-colonial, post-apartheid, and decolonizing context, integrating traditional arts and culture into development scholarship is part of an ongoing process of recognizing African agency, positioning Indigenous voices into their rightful place of authority, and deferring to the wisdom resident in communities themselves (Beinart 2012).

As imbongi demonstrate, rural and non-industrial societies possess complex, sophisticated, and well-developed artistic genres that, just as in western cultures, reveal societal histories, values, and aesthetics. As Lewis et al. (2008) argue, such “alternative representational genres” can be an important source of development knowledge. Much more than that, the imbongi’s poetry is a form of development in and of itself. Through its invocation of ancestral shades as well as its emotive and energizing effects on audiences, the poetry has the power to make things happen. It also offers a means of enlivening the cultural, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional lives of people living in conditions of oppressive deprivation. While poetry may not remove these conditions immediately, it expresses an aspect of the human spirit too often overlooked by reductionist development discourse and practice that emphasize material needs to the neglect or even detriment of

other human faculties. Thus, iimbongi and their literature can make a valuable contribution not only to knowledge for and about development, but also in the active practice of development that strives to enable people to live rich, healthy, and imaginative lives. Iimbongi animate African identities and languages for their audiences, they open spaces for discussion and decolonization and, in a society so damaged by the horrors of its past and the environments of its present, their words offer the healing possibility of hope.

Chapter 7: Neoliberal land reform and the vocal dispossessed

For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land. The land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.

~ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Introduction

As the newly-elected ANC government stepped into power, it found itself faced with the daunting task of dismantling several centuries of discriminatory policies and redressing their legacies. In particular, a long history of conflict, land seizures, and forced relocations had left the country with an extraordinarily unequal system of land tenure wherein over sixty-five per cent of the South African land base was owned by less than fifty thousand White farmers (Walker 2006, 145). The issue of land rights was therefore a key focus for the ANC government, which aimed to redistribute a third of White-owned farmlands to Black citizens within the first twenty years of its tenure (Bourdreaux 2010, 15).

With a society scarred by dispossession and separate development and their socio-economic consequences, unequal patterns of land ownership and distribution hold both material and symbolic importance in South Africa (Walker and Cousins 2015). Land reform has therefore remained one of the central issues on the political agenda in post-apartheid South Africa since 1994. Yet the justice and effectiveness of land reform have been limited by a variety of factors, including the failure to make crucial structural changes to the commercial agriculture sector (Jager 2015), South Africa's ubiquitous historical baggage of inequality and racism (Kepe 2009) and, in particular, the government's embrace of neoliberal

policies (Kepe et al. 2011). Within the contemporary political economy, the reduction of land to a market commodity has biased the land reform process against marginal and dispossessed classes—the very people it is intended to benefit (Kepe et al. 2011). If land reform is to shift from being a market venture to a mechanism for establishing true social justice, a counterhegemonic approach is in order.

This chapter takes up the thorny politics of land in South Africa, with particular emphasis on the complex and multi-layered cultural politics surrounding dispossession as expressed through oral literature. Looking at the ways in which the rise of neoliberalism over the past two decades of democracy has interfered with South Africa's land reform program and its role in equalizing historical injustices, I join scholars calling for new visions and approaches (e.g., Kepe et al. 2011, Fay 2015). In responding, I also join those who call for a cultural response to neoliberal discourse more generally, emphasizing the importance of artists and intellectuals and their imaginative role in redressing the social, cultural, and environmental vacuum in neoliberal politics (e.g., Giroux 2011). The chapter begins with a brief overview of factors involved in land politics in South Africa, including neoliberalism and traditional leadership. From here, I move on to close readings of historical and contemporary isiXhosa poetic texts. In my analysis, I explore ways in which oral poetry can help articulate an alternative political economy of land that extends far beyond narrowly-defined market relations to acknowledge the other values—symbolic and spiritual, for example—that land holds. As in the previous chapter, I argue that the affective power of izibongo derives from details of the craft: an imbongi's choice of words and metaphor, the rhythm of the language, the performance style. I discuss these details with an eye to the way that they combine to create a particular expression of society, culture, spirituality, and politics that is stronger and more powerful than the words alone would suggest. In this way,

iimbongi help tighten connections to landscape, kin, and heritage not only by informing people about their history, culture, and attendant responsibilities, but by enabling people to access deeper emotions about these things. Acknowledging and fostering this emotional connectedness can help remedy the utilitarian, market-based logic of neoliberalism by validating alternative meanings and values associated with land.

Land reform and the neoliberal state

Scholars argue that the inefficacy of South African land reform, which has failed to significantly benefit the rural poor, is due in large part to the program's entrenchment in a neoliberal political economy (e.g., Kepe et al. 2011). As discussed previously, the ANC's capitulation to neoliberal policies was largely due to geopolitical events at a global scale:

With the collapse of Soviet communism, and the temporary decline of social democracy in Western Europe in the early 1990s, progressive intellectuals submitted to Anglo-American liberalism in social theory. [...] Thus when the ANC leadership came under pressure to win market confidence in its economic leadership, it was able, with little opposition, to adopt orthodox policies that undermined the well-being and development of the poor majority that had voted the party into power in the first place. (Gumede and Dikeni 2009, 8).

The state's economic orientation has reduced the financial resources available for the land reform program, with the result that land negotiations are based on market values, primarily in the form of a "willing buyer, willing seller" model (Aliber 2015). As well as slowing the land reform process, this market orientation protects (primarily White) landowners at the expense of the disenfranchised majority and has promoted the view of land reform as a

market-driven procedure for the redistribution of a commodity, neglecting the symbolic elements involved in restitution and reconciliation (Aliber 2015). Instead, as a market commodity, land has become “functionally and discursively disembedded from socio-political histories of dispossession” which ignore the social, historical, cultural, and spiritual aspects wrapped up in land tenure (Kepe et al. 2011, 372). Thus, although land reforms are ostensibly intended to correct the effects of the commodification and privatization of land and the expulsion and relocation of peasant populations that occurred throughout most of South Africa’s history, the model that has emerged upholds these very processes even as it “compounds the social invisibility of marginalized people” (Kepe et al. 2011, 372).

Meanwhile, the pervasive rhetoric of neoliberalism has naturalized the market orientation of the contemporary political economy, making it increasingly difficult to reorient cultural priorities within a society based on the accumulation of capital (Harvey 2007, Giroux 2011). Therefore, the re-creation of a progressive program of land redistribution requires not only a leftward shift in government policy, but also a forceful counter-cultural narrative demanding the fulfilment of the ANC’s earlier social promises and accountability on the part of leaders. As Kepe et al. (2011) suggest, it also calls for the promotion of alternative, more culturally-sophisticated discourses able to consider the many layers of meaning and value attached to land beyond its economic, resource value. Clearly, there is very much a cultural element to land politics that emerges through the many discursive, artistic, and literary forms that represent relationships to land and attendant mythologies (Krog 2015). Just as in the apartheid period, the process of resistance and transformation must involve an awareness of these narratives and mythologies and a consciousness of alternatives.

“Decentralized despots” or legitimate leadership?

An added layer within this complex milieu is the lingering power of traditional leaders, particularly in rural areas of South Africa (Fraser 2007, Mathis 2007). Despite its vexed status in a modern, democratic nation, traditional governance remains integral to social, cultural, and political life throughout much of rural South Africa. Traditional leadership is specifically recognized in Chapter 12 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, which grants these leaders the authority to operate in accordance with customary law and to act as institutions at local levels on matters affecting local communities (Government of South Africa 1996). This power has been criticized by scholars (e.g., Ntsebeza 2005, Fraser 2007) who point to the dysfunctionality of the traditional leadership system as reinvented by the apartheid regime and its unsuitability in a liberal Western democracy in general, and to its retrogressive influence on land tenure arrangements in particular (Fraser 2007). Fraser (2007) in particular claims that traditional leadership constitutes one of two features of South Africa’s “colonial present” that are gravely undermining land reform processes.

It is true that during South Africa’s fraught twentieth century history, some chiefs honoured their social and political responsibilities to their people while others were co-opted by the apartheid regime, becoming a favoured class of despots that happily accepted the extended powers conferred on them by the apartheid state (Mamdani 1996). Yet it does not therefore follow that all traditional leaders are despots and that granting them a degree of legitimacy risks repeating apartheid-era history. Zolani Mkiva, Nelson Mandela’s imbongi laureate, argues that far from representing a “colonial present,” traditional leadership is antithetical to colonialism:

The institution of traditional leadership in South Africa predates the colonial era. So when the colonialists came here they found us intact in

terms of our governance. We had our own government with all its unwritten laws which were based on the African wisdoms and the frameworks that we had. They destroyed everything that we had. But the only thing that they couldn't take away from us was the institution of traditional leadership. So the question that you must ask then is "What is the institution of traditional leadership?" Broadly. It is not about those individuals that you see that are called traditional leaders. It's broader than that. The institution of traditional leadership involves preservation, protection and promotion of who we are. Because that institution, like other nuances of culture, is a gift from our forebears. The people that you see now sitting on the throne are custodians of something that does not belong to them as individuals. But they are the mirror of society in terms of what they do. (Mkiva 2015)

In Mkiva's appraisal, chiefs and kings are charged with weighty responsibilities to ancestors, citizens, and descendants yet to come. These responsibilities include safeguarding and stewarding their ancestral territories for the benefit of all people in the community in the past, present, and future. Western critiques that centre on allegations of corruption and the abuse of power in recent times dismiss a complicated history that includes centuries of resistance in which generations of chiefs and kings died defending their lands and people. As Mkiva explains,

Yes, you have traditional leaders that were used by the apartheid system. [...] Yes, there were those bad apples but you had traditional leaders who were part of the liberation struggle. Even for that matter, my sister, let me hasten to say this to you: that our people only here in the Eastern

Cape fought nine frontier wars and the tenth war that put the final nail in the coffin was the psychological warfare which was put to them by Sir George Grey with the Nongqawuse³⁸ incident. So we fought nine frontier wars, which were physical, which were brutal, where hundreds of thousands of our people over a period of a hundred years died. And ask me a question: who were the commanders and military officers in those wars of dispossession? They were the traditional leaders. Most of them were killed in the front line. (Mkiva 2015)

A new exhibit at the Albany Museum in Grahamstown corroborates Mkiva's account, discussing the historical significance and contemporary role of traditional leaders:

Traditional leaders of the 1800s guided their people through enormous changes. Like indigenous people worldwide, they could not stand up to European guns. As their way of life changed forever, they adapted and evolved. [...] In the 20th century traditional leaders watched as landlessness, overcrowding, taxation and migrant labour all created massive poverty. The apartheid policy offered to revive and respect all aspects of African identity. Some traditional leaders believed this and so embraced the policy. But apartheid only deepened poverty levels. Traditional leaders were torn between wanting to see their former status restored and the need to find ways to relieve their people's hardships. [...] Now in the 21st century, traditional leaders continue to adapt their roles. Though living within western-style democracy, they offer leadership which compliments elected officials. Supported by

³⁸ The prophetess who called for the slaughter of all the cattle of the amaXhosa people, deeply dividing the nation as well as bringing widespread famine and the capitulation of the amaXhosa to British colonialists.

provisions in the South African constitution, they retain a special quality of confidence and respect from their people. Their functions go beyond governance to deal with aspects of human relationships and behaviour. Always guided by trusted councillors, they practice African democracy and serve as spiritual and cultural bridges to the African way of living. (Albany Museum 2017)

While there is truth in the historical importance of traditional leaders, their role in contemporary South Africa is highly contentious. Chiefs proved instrumental in drumming up ANC support in rural areas and gained the support of both Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki in the early years of the new administration; new legislation passed in 2003 and 2005 further strengthened the powers that traditional leaders had enjoyed under apartheid (Ainslie and Kepe 2016). These undemocratic powers rest “to a significant extent—if variable by region—on their control of rural land and thus of the rural people with a stake in that land” (Ainslie and Kepe 2016). This control over some of South African’s most vulnerable populations, coupled with the regressive gender politics inherent to traditional leadership, is deeply problematic, particularly in a contemporary society that has largely abandoned the beliefs and customs that may once have provided checks and balances on this power.

On the other hand, many unsavory aspects of traditional leadership—deep conservatism, nepotism, sexism, and abuse of power—appear to be just as much a part of the culture of their democratically-elected counterparts. Given the string of government scandals ranging from Marikana to Nkandla and the cozy relationship that has always existed between capital and the South African state, it is painfully clear that liberal democracy has also left much to be desired in terms of instating equality, transparency and justice (Alexander 2013, Elgot 2016, Pather et al. 2014). Traditional leadership has had its share of

complication and disgrace, yet at the same the ideals it is rooted in could offer valuable models of alternative relationships between people, communities, and their landscapes. As Mamdani notes, “although tribes organized under the domination of elders, they contained redistributive mechanisms that thwarted tendencies to reproduce inequalities in a cumulative fashion”—though he is careful to counter this with: “The nature of the relationship between elders on the one hand and juniors and women on the other is still the subject of debate. Was it an exploitative relationship?” (Mamdani 1996, 41). Meanwhile, Jeff Peires points out that the amaXhosa political system had “no tradition of unconditional obedience to the king,” since “the position of the king as lineage head did not permit him to make unreasonable demands at the expense of his subordinates, or to interfere unwarrantedly in their domestic affairs” (Peires 1982, 28). Clearly, pre-colonial amaXhosa governance systems were much more complex than most Westerners can appreciate. Scholars have a responsibility to consider its complex and multifaceted nature, acknowledging the symbolic and emotional power it holds for many South Africans while examining its problematic aspects. The complex systems of checks and balances that developed over millennia of practice suggests that the systems of belief underpinning traditional leadership could provide insights into alternative understandings of land and land restitution freed from the neoliberal frameworks that currently encumber it.

The imbongi in traditional leadership

Imbongi are a fundamental aspect of amaXhosa traditional leadership (Brown and Kiguli 2006, 138, Mkiva 2015). They create linkages between past and future, leaders and commoners, earthly and spiritual realms (Opland 1983). In poems delivered at public gatherings before the leaders or dignitaries are about to speak, imbongi praise and challenge,

not only lauding their subjects but also preparing them for the address they are about to deliver through artful provocation or carefully coded messages. As my interviews showed, iimbongi remain a relevant and vital component of contemporary rural culture and are accorded deep respect in their communities. Thus, their function is manifold: even as they pique and critique the leader, they arouse reflection among their lay audiences.

AmaXhosa iimbongi play a recognized role in holding power to account, acting as mediators between leaders and the citizens they serve (Brown and Kiguli 2006). They complicate the alleged “decentralized despotism” of traditional leadership by providing a public avenue for voicing popular concerns, invoking the ancestral responsibilities of leaders and social expectations regarding their conduct. At the same time, they foreground a variety of cultural imperatives that often countervail those of western modernity. Through their commentary and critique, iimbongi inject an imaginative constellation of images, emotions, and metaphors into official proceedings. Finally, they act as community historians, which includes the remembrance and recitation of names, genealogies, territories, battles, and notable deeds that are a crucial aspect of their poetry.

An imbongi as I have said is an historian, according to all the levels that I gave you. Secondly, an imbongi is a go-between. He’s an intermediary between the people and leaders. So he is somebody who has a poetic license to talk truth to power. But at the same time he is that person who conveys royal messages from leadership to the people. So he is not just a praise singer, as many western people want to believe. He also says some critiques because the license is a proviso for him to say to leaders when they go astray, this that you do is not in sync with what culture, protocol, and heritage expect you to do. Right? So he has got

that license. So in one way or another the third level is that an imbongi is also a traditional leader in his own right. He assumes that position of being a traditional leader because he also provides leadership to leaders, he also provides guidance to leaders. He also reminds leaders how to do certain things in line with African customs. (Mkiva 2015)

These cultural practices, e.g., the recitation of names and genealogies, are fundamentally linked to land reform and territorial politics more broadly. As Opland explains, “the names of their ancestors held particular significance within the system of ancestor veneration, for not only is an individual descended from individuals, ritually he *is* his ancestors, *and his ancestors are identified with their dwelling places?*” (Opland 2005, 50, emphasis added). That is, to invoke ancestral lineages is to invoke their homelands, and vice versa. The imbongi, as “the mouthpiece of those who have departed, as well as those who are still alive,” is responsible for reminding people of their responsibilities to each. Or, in the words of Thokozani Ntshuntsha, an imbongi from Willowvale, “what are the clan names? They are the people that live upon you. The forefathers. The people that made you to be what you are. Because we believe that although they’re dead, they still live upon all things. They still live with you” (2015). This dwelling with the ancestors has implications for both the present and the future, for, as Ntshuntsha went on to explain, “there is a saying that says that if you don’t know who you are you cannot determine your future. If you don’t know where you come from, you cannot even understand where you are going to” (2015). Thus, the ancestral presence that the poet calls forth stirs the audience to reflect on their own dwelling places on these ancestral lands, their obligations to family and clan and the direction of their own lives within the larger collective.

“Thembu Spatterings”

The recollection of ancestral dwelling places carries different meanings in different locations; such recollections may be deeply painful in instances where ancestral homelands have been seized and dispossessed people denied access to their traditional homelands and to fulfilment of ancestral responsibilities. Yet, even in these cases, revisiting historical wrongs can help communities make sense of their current situation, as Jeff Opland describes in his discussion of a poem by David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi, a prominent imbongi whose career spanned the apartheid period. Born in 1926 in the Khundulu Valley in the northwestern region of the former Transkei, Manisi showed a powerful aptitude for poetry from a young age. Like other iimbongi from rural areas, Manisi grew up tending stock where he was accustomed to hearing men praise their cattle. He recounts,

It was really pleasant to listen to those supernatural men delineate their delightful praises with their pitched voices and sweet tongues [...] I was encouraged to accomplish my poetic inspiration, because, later on, old men would call and ask me to praise anything for their amusement and pleasure, and in turn, I would be congratulated and encouraged to keep up the spirit. (Opland and Maseko 2015, 275)

In 1945, while working as a labourer, Manisi encountered Reverend Storr Lister who agreed to sponsor him as a student at the Lovedale Missionary Institution in Alice. Manisi reached Form II of his secondary education before being expelled in 1948 following an incident that reveals both his early political convictions and his dedication to his art. As Manisi explains,

One Sunday afternoon a certain student of the amaZizi clan from Middledrift stood in front of our dormitory and recited Mpinda’s poem

which he read from *Imibengo* by Bennie. He had a stick in his right hand. I, then and there, took my knobbed stick and moving towards him I praised the children of Rharhabe. He ran away from me and I continued following him praising all the time. The students came out of the dormitories and followed hailing us, making a hell of a noise. This upset the Institution. (Opland 2005, 19)

Jeff Opland remarks that Manisi's expulsion from Lovedale must have been painful for him, "yet he was never bitter when he talked of the episode: he simply presented it, as he does here, as something he had to do, yet another action misinterpreted by whites in authority for which an innocent black person suffered" (Opland 2005, 20). Opland goes on to explain that "the poetry of Xhosa iimbongi is essentially political, and in his poetry Manisi fearlessly expressed his political conviction" (Opland 2005, 22). This is true of his poem "Thembu Spatterings," which recounts the history of the abaThembu chieftaincy. The poem reveals a complex politics of landscape that developed over hundreds of years of inhabitation and transcends the limited economic relationships with land that dominate within the contemporary political economy. At the time this poem was composed, Ntshiza Manzezulu Mthikrakra was chief in Yali-Manisi's Glen Grey district (Opland 1987). In violation of custom, Kaiser Mathanzima had been illegitimately installed as Paramount Chief of the entire Transkei by the Pretoria government despite political opposition from his distant cousin and rightful Paramount Chief Sabata Dalindyebo, who was forced into exile in 1980 (Opland 1987). As the greatest imbongi practicing at the time, Manisi was the poet laureate de jure of Chief Mathanzima. However, as an active member of the banned African National Congress who disagreed strongly both with Mathanzima's illegitimate leadership and his politics, Manisi "voluntarily withdrew from the poetic patronage of his chief," an act

of principle which condemned him to lasting obscurity as a poet and intellectual (Opland and Maseko 2015, 2).

The excerpt discussed here is taken from the translated transcription of a performance by Manisi recorded by scholar Jeff Opland in 1972 and recently published as “Thembu Spatterings” in *Imbali Zamanyange: Historical poems* (Yali-Manisi 2015, 234-265). The full poem, performed in isiXhosa by Manisi at Opland’s request, recounts the history of the abaThembu people during a 500-line impromptu performance that lasted thirty-four minutes, demonstrating Manisi’s remarkable ability to act as an historian for his people (Opland 2005). The depth of Manisi’s historical knowledge is demonstrated not only by the length and detail of the poem, but also by his ability to recall and narrate this history at a moment’s notice in the imbongi’s improvised poetic form.

Awul E-e-ewe!	Oh yes! Oh yes!
Yivani lusapho lukaNdaba	Listen, Ndaba’s ³⁹ people,
Yivani lusapho lukaNdab’enyamakazi	listen people of News of Game,
KaZondwa kaSokhawulela	of Object of Hatred, Leapfrogger,
KaNggolomsila kaVelabambhentsele!	Strutter, Appearer and they exposed themselves.
Sasilusapho lukaThembu sivel’eluhlangeni	We were Thembu’s ⁴⁰ people, a nation
Saza sehla sasing’ ezantsi	and we migrated, moving southwards.
Sawuwela kamb’ uMsimvubu	Then we crossed the Mzimvubu, ⁴¹
Saliwel’ iDedesi	we crossed the Dedesi
Saza kuwel’ uMthatha	and we crossed the Mthatha,
Safika see zinzi ngxingxilili	we arrived at a place to settle and stay
Kule mixethuka nale mixawuka	on these steep inclines and rocky mountains
Alo mhlaba ingokaNdaba	of this land which belonged to Ndaba.
Sithe sesizinzile sizinile	When we were stable we put down roots,
	we settled down and expanded.

³⁹ An ancestor whose name translates as “News” and whose praise name, Ndab’enyamakazi, means News of Game.

⁴⁰ The abaThembu are an isiXhosa-speaking nation descended from an ancestor named Thembu.

⁴¹ The Mzimvubu and Mthatha Rivers are among the most important of the Eastern Cape Province; the Dedesi River is a tributary of the Mzimvubu.

See zinsi see xangxe

The poem goes on to describe the subsequent battles with British invaders, concluding with the lines:

Ukuz' ibe nguGungubele noMfanta kubaThembu	So the Thembu Mfanta and Gungubele,
Ukuz' ibe nguGonya noTini kumaNgqika	the Ngqika Gonya and Tini,
Noluny' uwelekehle lweenkosi	as well as another group of chiefs
Bathathwa basiw' eSiqithini	were sent to Robben Island.
Wafel' apho k' uMfanta kaMthikrakra	There Mthikrakra's Mfanta died.
Nakaloku sisekumhlaba wayo	We're on his land today,
Kuba wawel' uNgangelizwe noMathanzima	for when Ngangelizwe moved with Manthanzima,
Balishiy' iCacadu ligcinwe nguMfanta	they left Cacadu to Mfanta,
Etshe' ebhatyin' egcin' umhlaba kayise	who guarded his father's land with a passion.
Kungoko lo mhlab' usengokaMthikrakra	That's why this land is still Mthikrakra's,
Ngowona mhlab' uligquba lamaHala	it's the land of the old Hala kraal,
Kuba kulapho walala khon' uMthikrakra	for here Mthikrakra lies buried.
Xa kulapho masibek' ingca	There we must stop for the moment:
Kub' imihl' ayiphelanga	there will be other occasions.

With this poem, Manisi describes an ancestral lineage and progressive inhabitation of the landscape spanning hundreds of years. This excerpt describes the inheritance of land and attendant responsibility as Ngangelizwe and Mathanzima “crossed over” to the realm of the ancestors, leaving Mfanta to defend the land on behalf of his father. As the poem asserts, this land still belongs to the deceased Mthikrakra, whose ownership has been preserved by his son's fierce defence of the land, the presence of his descendants and by the continued dwelling of his buried remains. The poem articulates a complex sense of land ownership that is tightly bound to history, lineage, relatedness and inhabitation.

Unlike many izibongo that lack obvious coherence or logical structure (Opland 1998), “Thembu Spatterings” is an epic-style narrative crowded with characters and events. Opening with a characteristic sequence of praise names, Manisi invokes the spirit of Ndaba by name and by the deeds and qualities by which he became known through his life. In

narrating the history and genealogy of amaXhosa settlement on the landscape in the Thembu region, Manisi affirms the amaXhosa right of ownership and dwelling on their lands. In turn, he documents the struggle for these lands, rebuking the British settlers for their illegitimate tenure and asserting the rightful ancestral claim of the Thembu chieftaincy. At the same time, he invokes emotional registers, articulating the strength and resolve of past chiefs, a sense of communal obligation with respect to their sacrifices, and of place and belonging inherent to the inhabited landscape. In sum, the poem presents an outlook and episteme antithetical to the legal and market-based discourse that defines Western systems of land tenure and private property ownership.

Yet the poem has additional layers of meaning not obvious to the average Western reader. What may seem to be minor details for many readers in fact is part of a cascade of linked meanings that recount a political history entangled with amaXhosa spirituality. The “kraal” referred to in the closing stanza is a circular cattle corral made of brush woven between upright posts. Located at the centre of the homestead, the kraal is an embodiment of the central aspects of amaXhosa spiritual life: ancestors and cattle. Traditionally, the family patriarch is buried under a central post and the kraal is thus the dwelling place of the ancestors of a homestead. Cattle are an important point of connection with the ancestral realm through ritual sacrifice, as they are the preferred animal for the most important ceremonies held to honour the ancestors. Land is necessary for the maintenance of cattle. There is a circularity in the poem, echoed in the shape of the kraal, as it articulates the ways in which history continues to inflect not only in the contemporary spiritual life of amaXhosa people, but also in material effects. Yet these cycles have suffered a rupture that remains unresolved. As Opland describes in his discussion of the poem,

The sacral chief *is* the people: his strength is theirs, and his well-being is

ensured by the sympathetic attention of his ancestors to his affairs and to the affairs of the chiefdom. But this ritual relationship is ruptured because Mfanta lies buried on Robben Island, where he was dumped by the whites for resisting white encroachment and fighting for the rights of his people. *And so* Manzezulu's people are destitute, and they will remain destitute and troubled as long as Mfanta's bones lie restless in foreign soil. (Opland 1987, 48, emphasis in original)

Manisi's poem describes the history of the present: not only do Mfanta's remains lie far from his ancestral territories, but also his spirit has not been appeased by the ritual sacrifice of a head of cattle and the accompanying ceremony that would connect him to his ancestors. His descendants continue to suffer physically as a result of "the knowledge that they have been unable to perform essential ritual acts" (Opland 1987). With these layered meanings, Manisi offers an alternative conception of landscape and of human relationships to landscape embedded in African spirituality that is opposed to Western and neoliberal notions about the nature of land and environment. His poetry draws us out of a narrow conceptualization of land as commodity, instead conveying the history, genealogy, language and spirituality of his home place through the affective power of the oral poem.

The King's speech

Nqadu

As described in the previous chapter, on 4 December 2015, I attended an invitational event at King Zwelonke's Great Place at Nqadu, near the town of Idutywa. Born in 1968 to the late King Xolilizwe C. Sigcawu and Queen mother Nozamile Sigcawu, King Zwelonke Mpendulo C. Sigcawu officially took office in 2009, becoming the twenty-second and current

monarch of the greater nation of isiXhosa-speaking people (Albany Museum 2017). His lineage includes the ancestor Gcaleka, senior son of Phalo and father of Khawuta, who was in turn the father of Hintsu, a king brutally murdered and dismembered by British invaders in 1835 and who subsequently became a martyr of the amaXhosa people. Following a leadership dispute between Gcaleka and his brother Rharhabe, the defeated Rharhabe went into exile across the Kei river where he established his own chieftaincy, now known as the amaRharhabe people. Despite this historical rift among the amaXhosa, Zwelonke, as the amaGcaleka leader, acts as a “symbol of national unity” (Peires 1982) whose leadership, at least symbolically, extends well beyond the amaGcaleka to the amaRharhabe and to isiXhosa-speaking people in general. As is relatively common to inherited positions, Zwelonke’s own coronation also involved a leadership dispute owing to genealogical complications:

Although he is biologically born from the 3rd House lineage, [Zwelonke] was adopted and raised to the Great House of Queen Nondwe Sigcawu as her own son. This process is a well known and practised Custom in Traditional African Customs. This was because of the health problems of Queen Nondwe’s only son, Prince Siseko (Nondoda), which rendered him incapable of becoming king. Thus Zwelonke was the only son who could rightfully take over the reins. (Albany Museum 2017)

As Zwelonke’s chosen imbongi at the December event, Thukela Poswayo performed immediately before the King’s address. He began his isibongo in the traditional manner, drawing his audience in with a rousing greeting:

Imbongi: A Zwelonke!

Abantu: A Zwelonke!

Imbongi: A! Zwelooooonke!

Abantu: A! Zwelooooonke

Imbongi: Hail Zwelonke!

Audience: Hail Zwelonke!

Imbongi: Hail! Zwelooooonke!

Audience: Hail!Zwelooooonke!

Iyakhumbulana mntane nkosi.

Iyakhumbulana thole leduna.

Ndelula amehlo ndayibona imilambo,

Ndanga ndinga qhayisa ndixele uthekwane

Ndithi ndimbi ngapha ndimhle ngapha.

We miss each other, child of a chief.

We miss each other, son of a bull.

I stretched my eyes and saw the rivers,

I wish I can boast like the uthekwane

Saying I'm ugly on this side, beautiful on that.

Poswayo grew up in a small village some twenty kilometres from the Transkeian town of Engcobo. Like most of the landscape of the former Transkei, the Engcobo area is rural and people who live in the region derive much of their livelihood from the land, whether through crop production, livestock husbandry, or foraging for natural foods, medicines or building supplies. This reliance on the land brings them into contact with the cycle of the seasons and with the plants and creatures around them. Poswayo opens his poem with a familiar expression, “ndimbi ngapha ndimhle ngapha,” (literally, I’m ugly here, I’m beautiful here) associated with a common South African waterbird, the uthekwane or hammerkop, a name that refers to the hammer-shaped crest at the back of its head. The uthekwane has a particular way of feeding in which it peers sideways into the water, turning its head from side to side to gaze downward first with one eye then with the other. The comical behaviour gives it the appearance of admiring its own reflection so that it is mocked for its vanity. Thus the poem opens with a well-known image that immediately introduces layers of complex and contradictory meaning. Among the amaZulu and some isiXhosa-speaking peoples, the uthekwane is associated with the lightning bird and may be viewed as a harbinger of misfortune or even death. As Poswayo explains,

Black people, they hate this bird. They hate it because they say it brings bad luck. If you see the bird. They usually say it likes looking at the river water, they say it's a bird that likes itself that much, it's a very ambitious bird. So it always... they say the reason it is there at the river, it is not just there to eat frogs and stuff, it's there to look at itself. Looking at the water, seeing itself there. Then it will go back and go again. It likes watching itself. So that's what I was just telling. These two lines are from the folklore that tells about the bird. (Poswayo 2016)

This explanation reveals the sophistication of both the poem and Poswayo's audience: not only do the lines incorporate folklore, but also references to the natural environment that the audience is assumed to understand and appreciate thanks to their attention to the creatures around them. The *uthekwane* is familiar to people who are equally knowledgeable about its diet and behaviours and their larger significance. In these lines, the mention of the *uthekwane* also alludes to the situation of Buyelekhaya Dalindyabo, the Thembu king who, in 2009, "was sentenced to 15 years in prison for culpable homicide, assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm, arson, and kidnapping" (Shange 2015). Dalindyabo made headlines again at the end of 2015 following an unsuccessful Supreme Court appeal followed by his incarceration. As the well-known *imbongi* to the disgraced Dalindyabo, Poswayo is aware that his appearance before the prominent and respected *amaGcaleka* king may arouse concern or even suspicion among the members of his audience. Here he encourages his listeners to look at the matter from all angles, considering both the ugly and beautiful aspects of a person or situation before drawing conclusions.

From here, Poswayo shifts into a praise of rivers in stanzas three and four. The parallelism in this section is a common stylistic trope of *isiXhosa izibongo*, particularly in the

opening sequences of poems. Here it acts as a sort of prelude, laying out a repetitive series of names or images as both poet and listener to warm up to larger subjects.

Ewe kaloku thole leduna	Yes then, son of a bull, ⁴²
Siyinqamle imilambo.	We crossed rivers.
Sawubona uMbhashe.	We saw the Mbhashe.
Sayinqam! imilambo	We crossed rivers
Sawusel'uMgwali.	And drank the Mgwali.
Sawubona uMthatha, sawubona uMthamvuna.	We saw the Mthatha, we saw the Mthamvuna.
Salibona iThukela, salibona iCongo,	We saw the Thukela, we saw the Congo.
Salibona iZambezi, salibona iLimpopo,	We saw the Zambezi, we saw the Limpopo.
Siyibonile imilambo	We've seen the rivers,
Ngoba neLubhelu siyibonile.	why, we've even seen the Lubhelu.

Ewe kaloku ndibiza ngabom.	Yes, now I name them deliberately.
Ngoba kaloku ukuze kulunge	So that all may go well
Ndithi Zwelonke	I say Zwelonke;
Funeka ndiyibiz'imilambo ye Afrika.	I must name the rivers of Africa.

Yet if this stanza appears simple, it is deceptively so. In naming rivers, Poswayo names the lifeblood of amaXhosa society. Rivers and their waters are perhaps the fundamental point of connection between people and their landscapes, ancestors, and history. Not only are they the dwelling place of the ancestors, they determined historical patterns of migration, settlement, and tranhumance movements. Historically, “each chiefdom had its own river and each subchiefdom had its own tributary;” only members of these communities and their cattle had rights to the water of these streams (Peires 1982, 2). Well-watered areas with many rivers and streams could support more communities and residents, with the result that “nearly all Xhosa place-names are the names of rivers, with a very few exceptions for mountains and lakes” (Peires 1982, 2).

⁴² The son of a warrior, a brave person.

Incanting the names of the rivers, Poswayo names amaXhosa communities and their ancestral dwelling places and in the process makes an allegorical reference to the ancestral spirits who inhabit their waters. Importantly, he begins by naming rivers that flow through the heart of King Zwelonke’s territories then moves on to rivers progressively farther away. As he does so, he maps both spatial and temporal distance, symbolically stepping backward along an ancestral lineage as he links the present company to other isiXhosa-speaking peoples, tracing their historical migration from northern regions of the Eastern Cape and beyond. The movement concludes with the mythical land of Lubhelo, perhaps in the Great Lakes region of East Africa, from which the amaXhosa are purported to have originally travelled. “I name them deliberately,” says Poswayo, “that all may go well.” In naming the rivers he symbolically invokes the distant ancestors whose presence can help to ensure success at the event and during the King’s reign more generally.

In the stanzas that follow, Poswayo asserts the King’s place in the royal lineage and in so doing reminds his audience of the King’s duty and obligation to his people and to uQamata the creator; Zwelonke does not accept the position as an individual, but as the child of a previous King and of an entire nation who must therefore “act with care.”

Ewe kaloku! Le ndawo ukuyo	Yes of course! The position you hold
Kwakukhe kwahlala omnye umntu kuyo	Was held by someone before you,
Kusezaw’hlal’omnyumntu	As there will be someone after.
Yiyo lo nto funek’uchul’ukunyathel’uchule	That is why you must act with care,
Uwabal’amanyathelo	Counting your steps,
Ngob’umlambo owela kuwo kwedini	For the river you’re crossing, young man,
Uzele amatye agewel’ucolothi.	Is full of slippery stones,
Ngentla ziziziba, ngezantsi ziziziba	Deep pools to the north, deep pools to the south. ⁴³

⁴³ Mentioned by the imbongi because it is known that there are people dwelling at the bottom of the river pits (a site of initiation of spiritual people)

Far from being an absolute leader with absolute power, the poem sketches out some of the layered and interlocking relationships and responsibilities that the King, in using his power and authority honourably and for the benefit of his people, is obliged to respect. Failing to do so could result in a loss of balance on the river's slippery stones and loss of life in its deep pools, the domain of ancestors and of the abantu bomlambo, people of the river. As Poswayo explains,

In this position it's not going to be smooth. That's what it simply tells.
The position you hold now will not make things smooth for you. You must always make sure that you will have enemies, and you may also create—yes there are enemies that you will find there, but the others will be created by you. (Poswayo 2016)

Traditional leadership is not characterized simply by wealth and privilege, but is both arduous and difficult, rife with dangerous rivalries and opportunities for corruption. It is the leader's responsibility to govern in an honourable and upright way despite these obstacles and to inspire his people to act in a similarly principled manner. Shifting from lineage to voice, the remainder of the poem tracks this notion of responsibility. The King must bring honour to his lineage by serving his people not only with the strength of his backbone but with the strength of his voice; he must right things with his words.

Thetha ke! Nasi isizwe sakokwenu	Speak then! Here is your nation.
Nang'amaGcaleka ka Khawuta.	Here are the Gcalekas of Khawuta. ⁴⁴
Nalusapho luka Zanzolo.	Here are the children of Zanzolo.
Na'usapho luka Sarhili.	Here are the children of Sarhili. ⁴⁵
Thetha ke nalo	So speak to them.
Ngoba kaloku okwakh'ukuthetha	For certainly your words

⁴⁴ The father of the ancestor Gcaleka.

⁴⁵ Son of Hintsá and a major figure in amaXhosa history.

Ngekhe kulambathe

[...]

IAfrika yakokwethu inyembezana.

Ifuna amadoda anomqolo,

Ifun'amadoda anelizwi elimbombo

Ukuze ath'akuthetha kulunge

Thetha ke,

Ngoba uThixo wakukhomba kuqala.

Thetha beve abantwana beli lizwe,

Thetha senz' isizwe sikayihlomkhulu

Ngob'ungathetha, zonke izinto zakulunga

Will not be in vain

[...]

Our Africa is crying.

It wants men with back bones,

It needs men with bold voices

To right things with their words.

Speak then,

For God pointed at you first.

Speak so that the children of this nation can hear you,

Speak, that your forefathers' nation may do as you ask,

For when you've spoken, things will fall into place.

Here the poet calls upon the King to speak. It is this speaking, above all, that will act as a guiding light to align a disordered society. Through the leader's speaking, teaching, and instructing his people wisely and judiciously, the people can in turn act confidently and honourably. In Poswayo's words,

This is what the message is now: because you know that there will be the other king as you come after the one. Then there's the one after you. So, all what you do now, do it knowing that you're not doing it for yourself, you're doing it for the generations to come. That's what is said there. [...] So now that you know that all what you're doing you're doing it for the next generation, for now stand firm. Stand firm. Because the reason why we were there on that special day, the King had a message to pass to his people. Now I'm encouraging him, that is what is happening. I'm encouraging him that he must stand firm and he must know that what he tells people now, God is listening. God will simply make his words stick to the minds of the people that he's talking

to. Because he's not doing it for himself, he's doing it for God. Because he's God-chosen. (Poswayo 2016)

Not until the closing stanzas of the poem does Poswayo turn to the occasion at hand: the launch of a campaign to counter the rampant consumption of alcohol during the holiday season that wreaks havoc on communities in the form of violence and automobile accidents. Here he condemns alcohol as one of three devices associated with treacherous White colonizers to ensnare and undermine the strength of the amaXhosa people. In a nod to the great poet S.E.K. Mqhayi, Poswayo cites a well-known passage from one of his poems.

Ngemihl'abelungu besiqhatha
Basinika utywala bebhotle
De wath'umQhayi,
Ngubani nalo? NguYeye.
Uhamba nabani?
Noyise. Umphathe ntoni?
Amasi. Ngendeb'enjani?
Ebomvu.

When White people arrived to cheat us
They delivered alcohol in bottles
Until Mqhayi⁴⁶ said,
Who is this? It is Yeye.
Who is walking with him?
His father. What has he brought for me?
Sour milk. What is the colour of the container?
It is red.

Poswayo explains the meaning of the lines as follows:

[Mqhayi] saw a chief with his son next to him. The chief was drunk and had a bottle of brandy in his hand. Then uMqhayi started writing a poem. Ngubani nalo - who is that? And he said here it is the younger boy. And whom is he going with? He's going with his father. And what is this that his father is carrying? Then the other boy said he's carrying a sour milk. With what? What is he carrying it with? What is it that container? Then they said it's a red container because what they knew

⁴⁶ An imbongi and historian; a major literary figure of the early twentieth century.

was that whatever that is in a container should be a sour milk. Because that's what they knew. [...] But no, it's not a red container, it's a clear bottle with a red brandy inside. Then he asked the boys and the boys told him innocently that this was the father carrying sour milk for his son. uMqhayi in that poem was condemning liquor. He was condemning the usage of brandy or the usage of liquor within our society. (Poswayo 2015)

Poswayo's linking of church and alcohol echoes earlier poems, such as S.E.K. Mqhayi's boisterous address to the Prince of Wales on the occasion of his visit to Port Elizabeth during his 1925 tour of the empire (Opland 2005). In this way, Poswayo links alcohol to the larger ills of colonialism and British imperialism and their lasting hangover.

She sent us the preacher, she sent us the bottle;
She sent us the bible, and barrels of brandy;
She sent us the breechloader, she sent us the cannon;
O, Roaring Britain! Which must we embrace?
(Jordan 1973, 27)

For Poswayo, the message is the key element of the poem, yet it is imperative that this message be delivered beautifully: "My kind of poetry is a very narrative one. Between these narrative lines, I like to put my message. I choose storytelling as my canvas, you see? Then the message...the actual drawing is the message. But I'm using these as my canvas so that I can just patch, patch, patch here and there. That's how it goes" (Poswayo 2016). On 4 December 2015, people assembled at Nqadu to receive a message from the King—a message denouncing not only the excess consumption of alcohol but the ongoing

colonization that alcohol represents. This message and its delivery, explains Poswayo, held profound symbolic importance.

Africa needs people like you. Africa has been robbed. Africa needs strong men. Strong men that can say words straight, that can put the straight message, that can tell a direct message. Straight messages that will revive righteousness with the people. Now you have to revive African people. They're coming from a rough background. When the white people came with brandy and wine, they gave us brandy, they gave us wine. They took all the wealth of our people. (Poswayo 2016)

The arrival of Whites resulted in the theft of land and cattle and the delivery of alcohol and alcoholism in exchange. Thus what may have appeared to be a minor public event can also be seen as a milestone in the ongoing process of denouncing colonialism and its lasting effects on amaXhosa communities. Alcohol, as Mqhayi makes clear and Poswayo reminds us, was as damaging to amaXhosa people as the bible, the cannon, and the breechloader; it was one of the weapons of colonization and is therefore implicated in the loss of land and wealth. With his poetry, Poswayo draws connections between land and lineage; alcohol and theft; power, autonomy and speech. Like Yali-Manisi, he links resonant meanings and histories to the land itself, acknowledging the layers of human dwelling and feeling that reside in each place.

Gwedana

I returned to the Mbashe Municipality several months later to see Thukela Poswayo perform again, this time at the village of Gwedana on 11 March 2016. The event, attended by several hundred people, was much larger and more formal than the previous occasion at Nqadu and marked the ceremonial bestowing of a leopard skin on a prominent chief from the Gwedana

area. Relatively few chiefs ever receive this honour, which is linked both to lineage and chiefly conduct. Once again, Poswayo performed immediately before King Zwelonke delivered his official address. After this address, the King presented Chief Mthetho with the leopard skin and Poswayo performed once again before Chief Mthetho delivered a speech.

The first poem was a spontaneous oration that lasted nearly seven minutes, delivered from the podium set up on a raised platform beside a row of dignitaries (chiefs, King, and government officials) seated at a table that faced the audience. From this position, Thukela was able to address both dignitaries and the seated crowd from an elevated position that conferred symbolic authority. The second poem, following the emotionally-charged ceremony, was briefer, lasting only three and a half minutes. During this second performance, the Chief stood at the podium while Thukela addressed him from the grass below. On this occasion too, Thukela was simply and elegantly dressed in button-down shirt and slacks and lacked any of the imbongi's typical accoutrements. Once again, he performed with a focused clarity and confidence and few gestures, yet this time with a voice more typical of imbongi, roaring throughout. Opening in such strong tones, there was not the room to build strength of volume as in the previous performance and there were moments during this performance where Poswayo's voice faltered under the strain. However, judging from my recordings, this mode of delivery appeared to be slightly more effective in capturing and holding the attention of his audience from the start compared to the quieter opening of the previous poem. The opening stanzas are presented below.

Imbongi: A! Zwelonke

Abantu: A! Zwelonke

Imbongi: A! Zwelooonke!

Abantu: A! Zwelonke!

Imbongi: Hail! Zwelonke

Audience: Hail! Zwelonke

Imbongi: Hail!Zwelooonke!

Audience: Hail!Zwelonke!

Mntan'omhle ⁴⁷	Honorable one,
Amehl'am ath'akukhangela ndabon'imilambo	Opening my eyes, I saw rivers.
Ndathi ndakujonga ngaphesheya	When I looked across
Ndazibon'iinkomo zako kwenu	I saw your family's cattle,
Ndazibon'iinkomo zako kwethu	I saw my family's cattle.
Ndiyazaz'ezako kwenu	I know those of your family
Ndiyazaz'ezako kwethu	I know those of my family.
Ndiyazehlula ngemibala	I know them by their colours ⁴⁹
Kuba zingaphesheya kwemilambo zicacile.	for even across the river they are distinct.
Zicacile zizakuhle	They are beautifully distinct
Zibonakala ngok'tyhobo	They appear now, charging.
Ewe kaloku!	Yes then!
Yithi khe ndicaphule ndenjenje	Let me say something
Ngoba kaloku ukuze kulunge maLawundini ⁴⁸	For in order for things to improve, maLawundini,
Vumani kuba sendiliphethibhozo	Allow me, for I already have the knife.
Ndabel'izizwe	I distributed among nations.
Vumani kaloku	Allow me then,
Ndabel'iQamata	I gave to Qamata ⁵⁰
Ndabel'umhlaba kalok'omagqagala	I gave the land with its dry boulders.
Ndabela kaloku umhlaba kaloku wakulo Daliwonga	I gave the land from Daliwonga's ⁵¹ family
Kuba kaloku kulapho zaphuma khon'iinkomo	From which the cattle came,
Zaqweqwema zadl'amathafa	Running to the fields.
Zafika kwaChotho zamila	They reached Chotho and stopped,
Zabuya nentombi	returning with a girl. ⁵²
Yafika yazal'amadodana	She arrived and gave birth to young boys.

⁴⁷ Literally, "Beautiful child."

⁴⁸ "MaLawundini" is someone without a tradition or custom who wants to fit in somewhere. The term is sometimes offensive but is not meant to be so in this case. It could mean that the King may feel like amalawundini because the imbongi is going to say things that he may not understand.

⁴⁹ Cattle colours are often particular to clan.

⁵⁰ In this case the town of Qamata (iQamata) rather than the god (uQamata).

⁵¹ The family includes Kaiser Daliwonga Mathanzima, who was installed as chief of the Transkei by the apartheid government.

⁵² These cattle were the lobola (bridewealth) for the girl from Chotho.

Cattle are central to amaXhosa culture and economy. Not only are they the primary form of wealth and exchange, they are traditionally the only route to marriage through the practice of lobola, in which cattle from the groom's family are given to the family of the bride (Opland 1983, Peires 1982). Historically, cattle have therefore "represented not only the accumulated product of past labour, they also served as the key to all future production and reproduction. The lobola tradition has led some scholars to suggest that possession of cattle was the crucial variable which enabled some lineages to expand at the expense of others" (Peires 1982, 4). Furthermore, they are an important point of connection with the ancestral realm through ritual sacrifice, as they are the preferred animal for the most important ceremonies held to honour the ancestors (Opland 1983).

From this perspective, the tight relationships between water, land, people, and cattle gain additional complexity. Although hospitable in many respects, a large proportion of the landscape inhabited by the amaXhosa is arid or otherwise unsuitable for year-round grazing. While the deep soils of river valleys produce a lush Valley Bushveld, much of the landscape is vegetated with scrubby Eastern Province Thornveld which provides poor grazing. Importantly, although the lush sourveld of the Valley bushveld "provided excellent grazing in the summer" it "lost most of its nutritional value after about four months, so that an exclusive diet of it caused botulism and stiff-sickness" (Peires 1982, 9). Sweetveld, on the other hand, "remained nutritious throughout the year but was very fragile," such that overstocking could cause permanent damage to the pastures (Peires 1982, 9). As a result, a variety of solutions emerged from the ongoing search for a way to live comfortably within the environmental constraints of land and climate. These ranged from burning off grasses to seasonal transhumance to the maintenance of cattle-stations away from the permanent homesteads established in areas more suitable for cropping. Social patterns adapted

themselves around the needs of cattle that, much more than a mere economic entity, were valued for their own sake and for their individual and collective beauty.

Given these values of cattle to amaXhosa people and their livelihoods, they have always figured prominently in izibongo. Traditionally, the individual cattle in a herd are named; the name of the bull in the herd of a king or chief is often used as one of that leader's praise names in izibongo or everyday speech. The multicoloured Nguni cattle are prized for the diversity of colours and markings and Nguni languages are replete with poetic terms to describe these (Opland 1983, Poland, Hammond-Tooke, and Voigt 2003). Thus, Poswayo states,

I know those of your family
I know those of my family.
I know them by their colours
For even across the river they are distinct.

This incorporation of cattle into izibongo is an ancient practice. In the first foreign travel account of isiXhosa poetry written during his a tour of southern Africa between 1864 and 1866 Gustav Fritsch noted,

The ideal of the [umXhosa], the object of his daydreams and the favorite subject of his songs (Liedern), is his oxen, which are his most valuable possession. With the praise songs (Lobgesängen) of the cattle those of the chief mix themselves, and in these in turn the chief's cattle figure prominently. (qtd in Opland 1983, 6)

Like many other iimbongi, Poswayo developed his talents praising cattle in his boyhood: "Since the young age I was [imbongi]. But the platform then was different from the platform I'm using now. I was following cattle and all those things. I would just sing the praises for the cattle" (Poswayo 2015).

In this poem as well, references to animals reveal their importance in the everyday life of amaXhosa people. The ihahane is a hadeda ibis, a large, brown and iridescent groundfeeding bird with a long, curved bill and an obnoxiously loud voice. The intsikizi, or southern ground hornbill, is another loud-voiced bird whose calls can be heard from as far as three kilometres away. In the stanza in which they occur, the imbongi slows his pace, articulating the alliterative lines. Filled with enormous caterpillars, the larger and louder hornbill is able to outboast the hadeda. Interestingly, although the hadeda is common throughout most of the African continent, the southern ground hornbill is listed as critically endangered in South Africa due to loss of habitat. Despite its strength, voice, and cultural status, the ground hornbill's boasting may fall silent soon enough.

Both of these poems contain literal and symbolic exhortations to speak, and to do so wisely and judiciously. Once again, the imbongi reminds the King of the precariousness of kingship. Although Zwelonke holds a position granted him by divine ordinance (i.e., the will of the amaXhosa god uQamata) he retains his power through the people's respect and goodwill, which he must work to earn and maintain. The poem concludes with a strong admonition to the chief to attend to the wishes of his people who have the power to marginalize and topple him. As Jeff Peires describes,

The extent to which the king controlled his subordinates at any given time depended on circumstances and his own personality, but he was constantly a factor in Xhosa politics, and could be defied but never ignored. It should be remembered that absolute domination was no part of the Xhosa political ethic. The power of any chief was limited by what his subordinates were prepared to accept. Moreover, the kingship

possessed symbolic and emotional associations which transcended its narrow political functions. (1982, 30)

In rural communities of the former Transkei, the institution of traditional leadership continues to carry considerable social, emotional, and symbolic weight (Mkiva 2015), though their role and importance in land tenure arrangements is disputed (Fay 2015). The politics of chieftainship are complex and the relationship between leader and commoner are nuanced. To some extent, such dynamics are captured in these poems, whose lines remind leaders of their limits and the audience of its collective power. These poems are also one example of the checks and balances inherent to this leadership, illustrating how citizens, now as in the past, have the power to defy, marginalize, and even depose leaders of whom they do not approve. This sense of mutual responsibility is pervasive in Poswayo's poems, for example in the lines

Le ngub'uyambetheyo
Asingubo yakho
Kub'ukh'oyilindeleyo ngasemva

This blanket that covers your body
Is not yours,
For someone behind you waits for it.

Ewe kaloku
Isikhundl'okuso kwedini
Sasikhe sahlal'omny'umntu ngaphambili
Kuba kakade
Le nt'umntu yinto yalo nto, ngumngcelele
Ngemihla oyihl'omkhulu aba besilw'iimfazwe
Bevul'umhlaba ukuze balime, wawusewukho

Yes, then,
The position you occupy, young man,
Belonged to someone else before.
For it is true,
People are like that, there is always a queue.
The days when your forefathers were in a war,
Opening up the ground to plough, you already existed.

Here Poswayo reiterates the reminder to Chief Mthetho that he is part of a lineage that extends before and behind him, and that he owes much to others who preceded him. There is also a sense in this excerpt, echoed in the earlier poems, that the Chief's life, like the

blanket or skin covering his body, is not his own. Rather, the ancestral lineage has dominance over his life and life choices; as the one appointed to follow in a line of chiefs, it falls to him to perform his appointed leadership role and serve his people honourably. The poet also reminds Mthetho that the hereditary designation by no means assures his success, since past Chiefs “have been deposed or superseded for being ‘cruel’, ‘stingy’ or even ‘stupid’” (Peires 1982, 54). He must therefore be both attentive and responsive to the wishes of his people.

Imbongi, too, are tied to ancestral lineages in particular ways. Among traditional communities, they are known to be among the amathwasa, spiritual healers with the ability to receive messages from the ancestral realm that are their responsibility to transmit. Failure to respond to the call to speak would be to defy the ithwasa spirit and by implication ancestral wishes, which could have grave consequences for the health of both the poet and his family. Thukela opens the poem by chiding his audience for their inattention during his previous performance then turns to the chief: “In order for me to be healthy, honourable one, / allow me to do this.” With these lines, he reminds the Chief that his personal health and wellbeing is contingent on being able to communicate the message contained in the lines that follow, which requires a respectful audience. In this way, Thukela excuses himself for the delivery of a message that may be unwelcome or strongly worded; his role as messenger is not one that he has chosen and he cannot be held entirely responsible for what he is compelled to say.

In the second poem for Zwelonke, rich, oily foods so plentiful that the ground grows slick with it such that the feast becoming a dark parody of opulence and excess, what Mbembe identifies as the “grotesque or the obscene,” a “tendency to excess and lack of proportion” that characterize the postcolony. Again in this poem Poswayo gets at the notion of food, here reminding the chief that “it is not right for a man to eat too much / And forget

that his cattle / Are tended by the dogs outside.” That is, a chief should not become so caught up in his own wealth that he neglects its source. Dogs, like their owners, are bound by mutual responsibility; starved dogs cannot tend cattle. Yet even as it urges humility and conscientiousness on the part of the Chief, this imagery offers a glimpse of another reality: the chief maintains “the right of capture and the distribution of spoils” (Peires 1982). In spite of its sophistication, traditional leadership is ultimately a system of power and, as such, it is prone to corruption and failure. An imbongi’s words can encourage conscientious behaviour but they are no guarantee of it.

Conclusion

The global diffusion of neoliberal capitalism has been profoundly destructive to communal values, to notions of the common good and to social institutions designed to protect them. As it has gained ascendancy in the economic realm, neoliberal ideology has also pervaded the general culture such that public thought increasingly occurs within the boundaries of its logic. This logic contributes to the organization of all aspects of society around capital accumulation, leading to increasing economic disparity and to the crime and discontent that accompanies it. This bodes ill for society in general as neoliberal rhetoric is deployed to explain or justify dismantling social structures that previously maintained economic balance and equality. However, the trend is particularly disheartening for countries such as South Africa with a long history of division and separate development that set the stage for the increased polarization wrought by the advent of neoliberal capitalism.

In South Africa, the ANC government’s capitulation to White capital and its neoliberal philosophy is a predictable, if unfortunate, consequence of the country’s economic and political situation at the time of its transition. In a bid to appease foreign and domestic

capital, the ANC struck such provocative terms as “nationalization” from its documents, reined in its radical elements and promoted a staid path of modest concession and reform (Marais 2001). Since 1994, the ruling party’s economic agenda has inhibited the progress of far-reaching initiatives aimed at redressing South Africa’s legacy of exclusion and unequal development. In particular, the government’s neoliberal outlook has stymied the land reform process as a whole by dissociating land from its social, political, and cultural history and reducing it to the status of a market commodity.

The political landscape in rural post-apartheid South Africa is a complicated terrain of overlapping hereditary and democratic jurisdictions with varying histories of failure and corruption, public support and derision associated with each. While scholars have cited the failings of chieftaincies, essentially declaring them an illegitimate form of governance in twentieth century South Africa (Fraser 2007, Mamdani 1996, Ntsebeza 2005), traditional leadership and its attendant cultures and worldviews could play an important role in transforming neoliberal approaches to land restitution. The process of decolonization and genuine reconciliation involves the redress of colonial mentality and historical ignorance by recognizing the validity of African knowledge and governance systems and considering them equal in value to Western models (Mkiva 2015, Wilson 2016). Iimbongi, as historians, artists, and prominent cultural figures, are vocal proponents of African systems and ontologies.

Reclaiming the land reform process as a means of establishing material and symbolic justice for South Africa’s vulnerable dispossessed will require more than a mere shift in policy and procedure. The ailing land reform system is symptomatic of the larger ills within neoliberal systems that require a wholesale sociocultural response. As David Harvey claims, “Tearing aside the neoliberal mask and exposing its seductive rhetoric, used so aptly to justify and legitimate the restoration of that power, has a significant role to play in

contemporary struggles” (Harvey 2007, 43). This chapter advocates deferring to African epistemologies and worldviews in approaching some of South Africa’s more intractable social dilemmas. In particular, the poems in this chapter provide a window into an alternative structure of economics and governance that, like other political economies, operates within broader sets of cultural and spiritual values that define and order them. Within this amaXhosa social order, an alternative land ethic and environmental sensibility is expressed through performances of oral poetry by iimbongi David Yali-Manisi and Thukela Poswayo. Their poems foreground the importance of the natural world, of collectivity, of solidarity with ancestral spirits and generations of unborn descendants. Both poets emphasize continuity, insisting that the positions that these leaders occupy, the regalia they wear, even the land they inhabit does not belong to them. Rather, in taking their brief place in a lineage that extends into past and future, King and Chief are called upon to act boldly and meaningfully but with humility, generosity and dignity since their actions will affect future generations and will be remembered for years to come. In doing so, these leaders can resist several of neoliberalism’s central tenets, namely individualism, private property, personal liberty over collective responsibility and accumulation as an end in itself. Poswayo, in delivering a series of images and metaphors, demonstrates the ongoing importance of the rivers, plants, and creatures of the Eastern Cape landscape. He also calls on King and Chief to show true leadership, to act for the betterment of their people, and to address the legacies of their nation’s difficult past. Crucially, he reminds them that the effects of their leadership extend well beyond their immediate time, place, and community. Manisi offers his poems “because it’s one of the ways to make our people feel what one is telling them. So I write poetry to keep that form of language for generations and generations to come, which we

think is a right form of putting right what is wrong, of elaborating to make people understand what is right” (Opland 2005, 25).

In all of these aspects, the poems also show how, as a cultural force and counterpoint to power, iimbongi could play a valuable role in propagating an ethic that sees land not as a commodity to be exchanged or accumulated, but as ancestral territories for which many fought and died. These lands will remain the cultural and spiritual homelands of their descendants for the imaginable future. In this context, the poetry of imbongi is clearly a mode of cultural resistance that affirms the symbolic and political role of traditional leaders who, although maligned, marginalized or entirely absent from mainstream South African society, remain a vital aspect of rural life. In insisting on the importance of the collective over the individual, cooperation, responsibility, spirituality, respect, iimbongi could help disrupt the conditions for capitalist accumulation. Their invocation of the ancestors, their reminder to people of who they are, their insistence on the individual’s place in a lineage that extends into past and future and their home on a territory that extends underfoot combine to hold not only power but people to account. It is not government alone that makes a democracy. In these poems, the iimbongi rouses king and citizens alike to answer the call of ancestral responsibility and individual potential on the long walk to justice.

Conclusion

Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.
Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art:
the art of words.

~ Ursula Le Guin

Inequality within and between nations has become one of the most pressing social concerns of the twenty-first century. Increasingly, inequality and uneven development are being recognized not only as undesirable aspects of the capitalist system, but as in-built elements of the capitalist mode of production that are inherent to its success (Piketty 2015, Atkinson 2015, Amin 1997, Smith 2008). As I have shown in this dissertation, inequality is also a legacy of colonial processes of violence and dispossession that enabled the expansion of European capitalism: the annexation of territories, the proletarianization of Indigenous populations and the subsequent exploitation of labour and environments for the project of capital accumulation. Yet the deeply entrenched and growing inequalities of the contemporary world are not merely a consequence of a capitalist mode of production itself, but also of the ideological and cultural foundations of this system and the discursive practices that continue to lend hegemonic ideologies strength and legitimacy. Inequality and the oppression that is part and parcel of it therefore cannot be undone merely by tweaking the political economy, by liberalizing or restricting trade, or by seeking to incorporate excluded groups into the capitalist economy. Instead, resolving present injustices requires a fundamental reexamination of our systems of belief, our modes of social organization, and the communal values we hold dear, considering critically how these have either supported or contested systems of oppression and the unjust exploitation and distribution of wealth.

Great postcolonial writers of the 1950s and 60s—Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi—discuss the fact that any relationship of dominance, exploitation or cruelty robs both oppressor and oppressed of the ability to reach their full human potential. Such relationships are a legacy not only of the world's colonial past, but also of the systems of thought and associated discourse that prop them up. Decolonization is therefore not merely a process of changing a political party or governance system. Rather, decolonization, like

feminism, environmental justice, and other social movements, seeks to fundamentally transform the nature of historically-established human relationships with our communities, our families, our landscapes and ourselves. Like colonialism itself, decolonization must take place at a variety of levels—social, economic, and cultural—and alter not only large-scale structures, but also localized discourse. Because decolonization, like independence, is such a massive and multifaceted undertaking, the ways and means of addressing it are equally diverse.

South Africa has, in many ways, followed a pre-established pattern of African post-colonialism. Like other post-colonial African states, it has been a stage for a sense of disappointment and betrayal that followed the rise of neoliberal capitalism in the country and the failure of its independence movement to produce a more egalitarian society. In South Africa, as elsewhere, the vast bulk of the population remains excluded from economic development, which continues to produce situations of increasing economic and social polarization throughout the country. Yet contemporary South Africa is an interesting case study not only in that it resembles other post-colonial African states: the capitalist structures that have produced such drastic inequalities in South Africa are emblematic of systems and patterns that exist on a global scale, wherein a cluster of elite states of the global North determine the exclusionary terms and conditions for the accumulation of capital. Development programs that ostensibly seek to eradicate poverty and advance human well-being are thwarted in their objectives by the racially- and economically-polarized capitalist logic that they propagate. Thus, the case of South Africa also exemplifies the racialized dispossession and resultant geographies of exclusion and benefit that have characterized global capitalism as a whole.

At the same time, South Africa presents an example of a society that succeeded in

overturning an untenable political order. As such, it also demonstrates ways in which larger scale political shifts can happen, the activities and processes that can help enable such transformation, and the areas in which prevailing structures and ideologies limit the possibilities for change. The South African case also presents an example of a country that remains defined by unequal social relationships that are a legacy of its colonial and segregationist past and by the unprecedented force of contemporary uprisings, protests, and demonstrations aimed at decolonizing and recalibrating them.

In the face of South Africa's oppressive racism and crippling economic inequality, Marxism offered one of the only systematic alternatives and played a central role in both political activism and postcolonial writing and scholarship through the apartheid period: "for much of the twentieth century, it was Marxism alone which emphasized the effects of the imperialist system and the dominating power structures involved, and in sketching out blueprints for a future free from domination and exploitation most twentieth-century anti-colonial writing was inspired by the possibilities of socialism" (Young 2001, 6). Marxist analyses make clear that the model of capitalist development that industrialized countries have enjoyed can be reproduced to some extent in the countries of the global South, but only insofar as they enable a class of elites to manipulate and enjoy the benefits of capital accumulation. Moreover, the global colour bar that was established during colonial times continues to constrain economic development and human well-being around the globe. As Samir Amin points out, industrialization in poor countries will never be able to follow the development path of the global North because they are unable "to absorb the [labour] reserve from the rural and informal economies—both because global competitiveness now requires techniques of production that make such absorption impossible, and because the safety valve of mass emigration is not available" (Amin 1997, ix). This situation is evident in

South Africa; with its vast ranks of the unemployed, it presents a microcosm of large scale economic imbalances that exist on a global level.

Given the perpetual state of social and environmental crisis that has come to define the current period of late capitalism, it is imperative to establish new frameworks for equitable and sustainable political economies at both national and international scales if we are to have any hope of realizing a sustainable and harmonious future for the planet. Such a shift relies on ideological transformations as much as political change, and the transformation of hegemonic ideologies necessarily involves attending to voices that articulate alternative perspectives. These voices speak most plainly from the margins, in their own venues and in their own languages.

Attending to marginalized voices is particularly important in the case of the African continent, which owes its own marginalization in no small part to pessimistic representations and interpretations imposed by the West. Depictions from outside the continent combine to create a pessimistic conception of a monolithic “Africa” whose societies are consistently portrayed as violent and dangerous while its natural environments are painted as pristine, majestic, and devoid of people. This unbalanced portrayal of violent and/or impoverished people in one realm and the willful erasure of people from another “has facilitated the undermining of Africans’ agency and humanity, patterns of unjust extractive and ecological enclaves and socioecological transformation on a massive scale” (Caminero-Santangelo 2014). In contrast, African literature, particularly vernacular literatures produced by and for African peoples, help overturn these neocolonial assumptions. They assert African agency, articulate local priorities, and emphasize the historical and contemporary causes that have given rise to current conditions of political instability and social and ecological degradation.

In South Africa, literature has been a particularly important means of resisting the

inequality, injustice and racism of the apartheid regime by reconceiving and shifting discourses. Examples include S.E.K. Mqhayi's visions of a liberated South Africa, the validation of workers' experiences offered by Alfred Themba Qabula and Nise Malange, Steve Biko's Black Consciousness writings, and the work of Black historians to document and articulate their own histories. Traditional poetic genres are particularly powerful as a means of resistance due to their cultural roots and the dense, layered meanings contained in their rhythms, sounds, and metaphors. As a traditionally oral art, poetry was closely connected to spiritual understandings of the power of the spoken word and its ability to foretell events or even to make things happen. Perhaps the most well-known example of such literature is izibongo, a contemporary literary genre with ancient roots that is performed by iimbongi—oral poets and important cultural figures. While the genre has adapted and changed over time, these changes have varied by culture and location; in the rural Transkei, the iimbongi's practice appears to be much the same as it was described in early colonial times and is widely understood among local people as a practice with spiritual undertones that is undertaken by artists with a gift for both language and healing. In urban parts of the country, iimbongi have produced a hybrid genre that incorporates hip hop and Western spoken word or slam poetry styles, often performing some or all of their poetry in English. Yet even in these areas, many people retain a sense of the spiritual power of iimbongi and their words, the importance of the message they bring, and the potential of their words to help heal damaged and suffering communities.

Previous scholars have emphasized the political function that iimbongi played during the apartheid period, linking it to the iimbongi's pre-colonial role in speaking truth to power through their public performances. Recent changes and adaptations within the genre, which reflect changing social and political conditions, have allowed iimbongi to continue to act as

political figures in South African society throughout the apartheid and post-apartheid periods (Kaschula and Diop 2000). Emphasizing the ways in which the tradition has changed, Kaschula writes,

The tradition to which these iimbongi are heir is a dynamic one which has developed and adapted to new contexts and environments. Urbanization, the impact of education, the formation of the independent homelands, the changing nature of the chieftainship, the emergence of black nationalism, and the recent release of political prisoners and unbanning of organizations have all had their effect on the tradition. (Kaschula 1993)

Indeed, the imbongi has typically functioned as both a counterpoint to power and an integral part of traditional leadership, with both iimbongi and traditional leaders relying on and defining one another. The eulogistic genre of izibongo requires a subject who in turn needs the courage, inspiration and legitimization that izibongo offer.

Yet there is a darker side to these transformations, which are founded on “an intricate relationship between those who control power, *and their continued legitimisation through political oratory* produced by the poet” (Kaschula and Diop 2000, emphasis added). Iimbongi are not necessarily political progressives, but may instead reinforce aspects of traditional society that are damaging to particular groups or notions of a precolonial African identity that are no longer relevant or recoverable in a society transformed by centuries of Western influence. As we have seen, iimbongi may also be unreliable in delivering their message, whether because they are unable to articulate it for political reasons, or because they are unable to receive it for spiritual ones.

That is, my research suggests that the imbongi’s transition from rural, traditional

realms to the urban, political ones is not as smooth as scholars have made out. By presenting iimbongi as political commentators and izibongo as a political literary genre, scholars have not only neglected the multiple levels on which the poetry works, but have inadvertently placed unrealistic expectations on practitioners and on the art form itself. In particular, scholars writing on iimbongi and izibongo have omitted spiritual aspects which remain central to the tradition. Arguably, it is the spiritual nature of the genre that endows the imbongi with the “poetic license” to criticize figures of authority with impunity. Operating in the fullest spiritual sense articulated by participants in my research, iimbongi are rare and gifted people with a sacred duty to receive and transmit messages—not only from subjects to their leaders as previous commentators have pointed out, but between the realm of the living and the realms beyond. They carry out this task often at great personal cost, yet do so in part because failure to accept the call could cost even more. Performing spontaneously and in response to the event and people at hand, they are carried along on a flow of words that, after their performance, they are often entirely unable to recall. For all of these reasons, an imbongi seen as a spiritual figure whose primary responsibility is to promote harmonious relations between God, the ancestral shades, and their earthly kin, differs in fundamental ways from a poet seen primarily as political, as a secular voice speaking truth to power.

As I have presented in this study, it is simply not possible for a literary figure traditionally understood as connected to and inspired by God and/or ancestral shades to perform the same function in a secular political realm characterized by censorship and corruption. Promoting the notion that the imbongi can, should, or does continue to speak an uncensored version of truth to power, unfavourable political circumstances notwithstanding, is not only inaccurate but dangerously misleading. Even in more traditional contexts, the vision of imbongi as healer and medium may well be exaggerated or idealized. With the

additional removal of the spiritual checks and balances that might have prevented iimbongi from functioning as propagandists for those in power, it is unlikely that mainstream iimbongi such as those who perform at the State of the Nation Address, the opening of provincial parliamentary sessions, and other high-profile public events are able to perform the functions they would have historically.

Furthermore, the characterization of pre-colonial iimbongi as “political” because they speak truth to power is also imprecise; this appellation imposes Western notions of power and politics, failing to adequately distinguish between the party politics of contemporary society and the complex relationships between land and lineage, power and obligation, privilege and responsibility that define traditional forms of leadership. Most of my research participants distinguished between contemporary politics and traditional affairs and did *not* ascribe a political role to the latter because traditional leaders are not partisan figures. Particularly in the rural setting, where people were less familiar with televised performances of iimbongi at high-profile political events, they associated iimbongi primarily with traditional leadership, which they did not consider to be political. The reasons for this are clear: a chief or king, who has inherited their position through divine ordinance, occupies a position of authority very different from that of an elected representative accountable to party members, the party line and voting constituents. Instead, traditional leaders represent and are responsible for defending the rights and interests of all people in their chiefdom or kingdom and are moreover deeply responsible to ancestral spirits and to unborn generations yet to come. Their responsibility and role dramatically transcends the political tenure of any given politician, who occupies a leadership position thanks to their ability to curry the favour of the majority of their electorate. Traditional leaders are not faced with the same need to establish themselves as popular figures and, thus, in the traditional context the danger that

the imbongi will function as a propagandist is at least somewhat reduced.

Among my research participants, the imbongi's role and the relationship between iimbongi and traditional leaders was therefore not understood as political in the sense articulated by scholars. Although the tradition has indeed shifted and adapted to reflect changing political circumstances in the country, and although iimbongi have certainly played a political role outside the traditional realm from colonial times to the present, the movement of iimbongi between traditional and political realms is not straightforward or simple. The foreign systems of land tenure, governance, spiritual worship, and legal procedure imposed alongside the Western capitalist order have produced a complex system of overlapping obligations and beliefs. As paid performers operating within the stifled political climate of post-apartheid South Africa, iimbongi, like other public intellectuals, are limited in what they are able to say publicly. In addition, spiritual understandings of the imbongi's compulsion to speak and the meaning and power of their spoken words is drastically different in a literate, Christian society than in a pre-colonial, oral society organized around very different spiritual beliefs. Rather than spiritual figures with a message or a duty to question and provoke, in the political realm the former power of the imbongi is undermined by the public's understanding of the fact that during paid political gigs, their performances are designed to bolster the image of the political figure in question. Finally, it seems that iimbongi operating in the urban, political world may lack the linguistic resources to fulfil their former role as provocateur and critic in the difficult circumstances of contemporary South Africa. While urban performers and their audiences may both have the expectation that iimbongi will be able to "come around" a contentious political topic, delivering a message or criticism obliquely rather than directly through skillful poetic means, this may not always be possible. As my research participants made clear, many of the words,

idioms, metaphors and linguistic constructions available to rural iimbongi performing in “deep Xhosa” cannot be used in urban contexts as they simply will not be understood.

It seems clear that many contemporary iimbongi *have* been coopted; their work *has* been commodified. What’s more, as predominantly male figures attached to conservative traditions that can be oppressive in themselves, they do not necessarily voice progressive ideologies of openmindedness and equality. This does not signal a failure of iimbongi or of the izibongo genre to adapt to changing circumstances, nor is it a sign that the genre is becoming commercialized and that the former beauty and integrity of the art form is being lost. If anything, I believe it is more likely that observers have failed to fully appreciate and articulate the many facets of what the tradition is and does, instead setting up the expectation that it can be translated into drastically different social and political contexts without correspondingly drastic shifts in its meaning and function. Also, scholars have not tended to acknowledge the pronounced difference in language, content, and context that exists between izibongo produced in more rural traditional contexts, such as that of the former Transkei, and those produced in the urban and peri-urban areas that are both more accessible to researchers and subject to the influence of Western languages and traditions. While an examination of these differences is beyond the scope of this research, it is clear that oral literature is alive and well in rural areas of South Africa, that in many contexts iimbongi are noble and exemplary figures producing literary art of the highest order, and that ample opportunity for future research exists.

Certainly, as participants in my research acknowledged almost universally, iimbongi remain a vital component of amaXhosa culture and identity. Their importance is much more than political: iimbongi play an important healing role and open new possibilities for amaXhosa traditions and spiritualities to flourish. Whether they enter the complex terrain of

the corporate and commercial mainstream or the small stages of family and community gatherings, iimbongi animate African identities and histories for their audiences. They insist on the beauty of the isiXhosa language and the importance of traditions of mutual encouragement and support, in the townships they perform hybridity, opening new possibilities for learning and culture by creatively mingling very different languages and traditions. In the process, iimbongi present opportunities for challenging and redefining Western notions of “development” by offering a form of active development practice. They open spaces for discussion and decolonization, for appraising and reimagining the political order that has so polarized the nation. Resisting the reductionist and utilitarian discourse of Western capitalism, they restore depth, meaning and beauty to the world and the word.

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Appendix A: FOSATU by Alfred Themba Qabula

FOSATU⁵³

Nguye wavela!
Basho bonke bathi wavela!
Wena hlathi elihambayo laseAfrika.
Ngifike amawele elilelana
Kanti ngabasebenzi
Abasebenza ezimbonini
Bexoxelana ngezinkinga
Ezibahlupha ezimbonini
Abazisebenzela eAfrika.

Ngibone omunye edudza abanye,
Ebesula izinyembezi emhleweni.
Ngibone umhlola
Ngoba nakuye zisuke zagobhoz'izinyembezi emhleweni.
Basebenzi ngowani na lowo Maye!?
Nikhala nje ngubanina onihluphayo?
Balekani ningene kulelohlati
Hlath'limnyama elabonwa ngabaqashi balibalekela
labonwa
Ngabasebenzi
Bathi: 'ngelethu masingeneni sicashe
Ukuze siphephe kubazingeli bethu.
Bangena kulelhlathi baphuma
Sebelashwe uvalo nengebhe
Yokwesaba izitha zabo.

Sikhukhukazi esimaphikw'abanzi
Okufukumel'amatshwele aso,
Sifukamele nathi,
Ngalawamaphiko akho angena ubadlululo.
Sikhukhumeze nathi,
Ukuze sihluzele'ingqondo sihlakaniphe.
Anolak'amadodana akho,
Ingabe uwachela ngaluphi uhlobo lwentelezi
Sichele nathi
Ukuze siwafuze senze njengawe
Uzele phela FOSATU
Amadodana akhe angewele iAfrika yonkana
Nangaphesheya onyana bakhe bakhona

It is he who has appeared!
They all said that he had appeared!
You moving forest of Africa.
When I arrived the twins were all crying
These were the workers,
Industrial workers,
Discussing the problems
That affect them in the industries
They work for in Africa.

I saw one of them consoling others,
Wiping their tears from their eyes.
I saw wonders because even in his
Eyes the tears did flow.
Worker, about what is that cry, Maye!?
You are crying, who is troubling you?
Escape into that forest,
The black forest that the employers saw and ran away from
for safety.
The workers saw it too.
It belongs to us, let us hide they said.
Let us take refuge in it and be safe from our hunters.
Deep in the forest they hid themselves, and then came out,
And when they came out
They were free from fear.

You are the hen with wide wings
that protects its chickens,
Protect us too,
With those sacred wings of yours that know no discrimination.
Protect us too,
So that we gain wisdom.
Militant are your sons and daughters,
One wonders what kind of muti they use.
Sprinkle it so that we take
After them and act likewise.
FOSATU has given birth.
Its sons are spread all over Africa.
Even overseas you find its sons

⁵³ From Kaschula, R. H. (1991). *The transitional role of the Xhosa oral poet in contemporary South African society*. (Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation), Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

FOSATU ulibhubesi,
Elingquma ePitoli eseNyakatho
Unesihovisi zenyunyane kulo lonke.

FOSATU sukukhethile,
Ukuba sihole kade sasibakhetha abaholi.
Sikhetha abantu esasibathemba
Abantu esazalwa nabo sakhula nabo
Abantu abalwaziyo lonke usizi lwethu
Nesasigqilazeke kanye nabo
Sabakhetha ngoba sasikholwa
Ukuthi balubhaqa olunkhanyisa indlela yethu eya
enkululekweni
Kanti kuzothi sesibaphakamisele
Basiphedukela
Basithuthela izimpimpi
Zasihlupha

Amathambo ami nabalozi bangitshela ukuthi
Yebo, uzele amadodana akho mahle
Futhi ahlakaniiphile ekanti aphilile kodwa
Kukhona isifo esingukufa
Enye indodana akho iyagula impela
Lesisifo esingukufa
Singawathelela namanye amadodana akho
Nawo agcine onke esegula
Ngempela eguliswa yisifo esibi kakhulu
Isifo somdlavusa, ewe umdlavusa.

Ngikubhekile konke
Okwenzayo!
Ulibinda FOSATU!
Bayethe!
Amandla kubasebenzi!

FOSATU, you are the lion,
That roared at Pretoria North.
With union offices everywhere.

FOSATU, we have chosen you to lead us,
Time and again we have been electing leaders,
Electing people we trusted,
And with whom we were born and with whom we grew up,
People who know all our sufferings,
Together with whom we were enslaved,
We had elected them because we believed,
They found a lamp to brighten the way to freedom,
But to our dismay
They turned against us,
They brought impimpis into our midst to inflict
Sufferings upon us.

My bones and my abalozi are telling me this,
Yebo, handsome are your sons,
Intelligent and healthy,
But a deadly disease threatens them,
One of your children is ailing,
and this disease called Death
May infect your other sons,
Leaving them all sick,
With this horrible disease,
Cancer, yes Cancer.

I am watching all that you are
Doing!
You are great, FOSATU!
Hail!
Power to the workers!

Appendix B: Isibongo performed at the State of the Nation Address 2016

Gamuza le nyang'ephum'emafini	Gamuza, this moon that emerges from the sky
Inyang'exhoph'ubumnyama	The moon that disturbs the darkness
Yaxhoph'iikhonkwane zobanjululo	And disturbed apartheid nails
Kwaze kwas'amabhul'ezulazul'ephithizela	Until the Boers were confused.
Ukuba niyeyekiiiiile boDemethi	If you leave it you, Demetis.
Ngob'enkhulul'amaAfrik'onke	Because he liberated you, all Africans,
Umdon'omile phezu kweNkandla	A wild tree standing on Nkandla.
Haye bawulabalabela	My goodness they play around!
Unomfundi woqobo abethi akafundile	The learned they said he's not:
Ngiyo baphikisa ngiyoze ngife	I'll disagree with them till I die.
Ufundil'okaMsholoz'ufundisiwe	The son of Msholoz is educated,
Kungafakaz'unina khulu	His grandmother can bear witness.
UMayengwaye Mpindamshaye	Mayengwaye Mpindamshaye,
Kuye kufakaze ngisho ogazi lakhe kwabaka Bhengu	His relative from Bhengus will also witness it.
Inkosana kaKhongolose	The prince of Congress,
Abayibeka beyibangis'abakhulu	Placed there despite competition with great ones,
Inkosana abayibeka ngobuqhawe nangobuhlakani bayo	The prince placed for his heroism and courage
Abanye babekwa ngokuzabalaza kooyise	Unlike others whose fathers struggled, paving the way for
Sihlah'esikhulu, esihlula ngisho sebethi bayasisephula	their sons. The great branch which is difficult to cut.
Chief of intelligence	Chief of intelligence!
Indla beyiphikisa ngish'ezikhundlen'eziphezulu	They stood against him even in higher positions
Mthetho kaZuma kaSophinokhombangosophakathi	The law of Zuma of Sophinokhombangosophakathi ⁵⁴
Babemfel'umona	They were jealous of him
Ubuholi k'abufundelwa maAfrika	You don't need schooling to be a leader, Africans.
Ubuholi busegazini kuwe Msholoz	Leadership style is in your blood, Msholoz.
Obahol'ekudingiswen'eLusaka	You lead them in exile in Lusaka,
Phaya bakukhothamela	There they bowed to you.
Nanamhlanjena amaAfrik'ayakukhothamela	Even today, Africans bow to you.
Uqhajan'akaviki ngasihlangu	The small one who does not hide behind the shoe,
Akanje ngasotha mlilo	He's not like one next to the fire.
Iindab'engizwe ngimncane	News I heard when I was still young,

⁵⁴Meaning "he points with his long finger"

Ngaze ngamdala ngaybona ngamehlo
Ngiyibone nyakana ka 2005
Bethiwa okaZum'unecala
Icalokutyholwa ngosopolitik'epalamente
Amany'amacala etyholwa ziimanty'enkantolo
UGedlehlelekisa, abanye bemkhamfula
Umazul'az'ayithole
Nanamhlanjena ziyathakaza izizwe zonke
Uvula bevalile
Umgoq'abawuvale phakath'epalamente
Bethi ke asoyiphind'ibus'eka Msholoji
Nanamhlanj'iyangena
Kwaye kwajampa ngisho nozwe ngephepha
Isithol'esimagqapagqapa
Hebo kwezakithi kooZuma
Esibhekwe zizizwe zonke, zasmoyizelela
AmaKomanisi asimoyizelela
Eze Cosatu zisbhokile zonke zisbhokile zasmoyizelela
Msholoji ngekhe ngikqede Nxamalala

When I grew I saw with my own eyes,
I saw it in year 2005:
They said Zuma is guilty.
Charges which were brought by politicians in parliament
Other charges were brought by judges in court.
Gedlehlelekisa, others disrespected him,
He who walks around until he finds it.
Even today nations are excited,
He opens where it is closed.
They conspired against him in parliament,
Saying Msholoji will never lead again
And today he is entering.
They even jumped those who read from the news papers.
The plant with different colours.
Yes, to ours, to the Zumas.
All nations are watching with a smile,
Communists are smiling too.
All the Cosatu members looked at it and smile.
Msholoji, I'll never finish, Nxamalala.

Appendix C: Izibongo performed by Thukela Poswayo

Address to King Zwelonke, 4 December 2015⁵⁵

Imbongi: A Zwelonke!

Abantu: A Zwelonke!

Imbongi: A! Zwelooonke!

Abantu: A! Zwelooonke

Iyakhumbulana mntane nkosi.

Iyakhumbulana thole leduna.

Ndelula amehlo ndayibona imilambo,

Ndanga ndinga qhayisa ndixele uthekwane

Ndithi ndimbi ngapha ndimhle ngapha.

Ewe kaloku thole leduna

Siyinqamle imilambo.

Sawubona uMbhashe.

Sayinqaml' imilambo

Sawusel'uMgwali.

Sawubona uMthatha, sawubona uMthamvuna.

Salibona iThukela, salibona iCongo,

Salibona iZambezi, salibona iLimpopo,

Siyibonile imilambo

Ngoba neLubhelu siyibonile.

Ewe kaloku ndibiza ngabom.

Ngoba kaloku ukuze kulunge

Ndithi Zwelonke

Funeka ndiyibiz'imilambo ye Afrika.

Ewe kaloku kwakudala,

Le mini yayi saziwa iyakuz'ifike

Ungeka qashulwa, engekakuzali unyoko

Wawusele uzelwe.

Imbongi: Hail Zwelonke!

Audience: Hail Zwelonke!

Imbongi: Hail! Zwelooonke!

Audience: Hail!Zwelooonke!

We miss each other, child of a chief.

We miss each other, son of a bull.

I stretched my eyes and saw the rivers,

I wish I can boast like the thekwane

Saying I'm ugly on this side, beautiful on that.

Yes then, son of a bull,⁵⁶

We crossed rivers.

We saw the Mbhashe.

We crossed rivers

And drank the Mgwali.

We saw the Mthatha, we saw the Mthamvuna.

We saw the Thukela, we saw the Congo.

We saw the Zambezi, we saw the Limpopo.

We've seen the rivers,

why, we've even seen the Lubhelu.

Yes, now I name them deliberately.

So that all may go well

I say Zwelonke;

I must name the rivers of Africa.

Yes, you see, even long ago

It was known this day would come.

Before you were conceived, before

You were born to your mother, you existed.

⁵⁵ Poems in this series translated by Dumisa Mpupha and Emily McGiffin

⁵⁶ e.g., the son of a warrior, brave person

Ke kambe okwethu kukungqina
Sithi nal'ithole lika Xolilizwe.
Nants' inkonyane yohlanga
Eyabizwa ingekaveli.

Now we need only witness,
Saying that this is Xolilizwe's⁵⁷ calf.
This is the calf of the nation,
Named before he was born.

Ewe kaloku! Le ndawo ukuyo
Kwakukhe kwahlala omnye umntu kuyo
Kusezaw'hlal'omnyumntu
Yiyo lo nto funek'uchul'ukunyathel'uchule
Uwabal'amanyathelo
Ngob'umlambo owela kuwo kwedini
Uzele amatye agewel'ucolothi.
Ngentla ziziziba, ngezantsi ziziziba

Yes of course! The position you hold
Was held by someone before you,
As there will be someone after.
That is why you must act with care,
Counting your steps,
For the river you're crossing, young man,
Is full of slippery stones,
Deep pools to the north, deep pools to the south.⁵⁸

Chula ke ukhangele ngaphesheya
Ngoba kaloku ukwenza kwakho namhla
Kuyakulandela ngemihla sewungasekho

Be steady then and look across⁵⁹
Because what you do in this time
Will follow you when you depart.

Ngoba kaloku okwenzayo namhla
Kwakukhe kwenziwa ngaphambili
Yima ke thole lomThembukazi
Yim'uthi gomololo.
Amandl'uwanikiwe
Ngob'igunya walinikwa kuqala

Because what you do today
Was done before.
Stand still then, lamb of the Thembukazi,⁶⁰
Stand firm as ever.⁶¹
You've been given the power,
For you've been given authority from the start.

Thetha ke! Nasi isizwe sakokwenu
Nang'amaGcaleka ka Khawuta.
Nalusapho luka Zanzolo.
Nal'usapho luka Sarhili.

Speak then! Here is your nation.
Here are the Gcalekas of Khawuta.⁶²
Here are the children of Zanzolo.
Here are the children of Sarhili.⁶³

⁵⁷ Zwelonke's father.

⁵⁸ Mentioned by the imbongi because it is known that there are people dwelling at the bottom of the river pits (a site of initiation of spiritual people).

⁵⁹ i.e., to the ancestral realm.

⁶⁰ -kazi is a feminine suffix, thus "lamb of the Thembu woman."

⁶¹ The phrase "Yim'uthi gomololo" urges that one should not be shaken by any possible opposition and instead must be brave at all costs, even to the extent of giving up one's life. The various translations could include "stand firm," "be strong," or "be courageous."

⁶² The father of the ancestor Gcaleka.

⁶³ Son of Hintsu and a major figure in amaXhosa history.

Thetha ke nalo
Ngoba kaloku okwakh'ukuthetha
Ngekhe kulambathe
Ngoba kaloku uThix'uMdali, uQamata
Woobawo mkhulu,
Wakhomba ngomnwe wakhe
Wakhomb'indoda'emayi khokel'amanye amadoda,
Ke ngelakh 'ilizwi uyakubeka indlebe.
Aphulaphule enze kulunge kokwethu.

IAfrika yakokwethu inyembezana.
Ifuna amadoda anomqolo,
Ifun'amadoda anelizwi elimbombo
Ukuze ath'akuthetha kulunge

Thetha ke,
Ngoba uThixo wakukhomba kuqala.
Thetha beve abantwana beli lizwe,
Thetha senz' isizwe sikayihlomkhulu
Ngob'ungathetha, zonke izinto zakulunga

Ngemihla besithatha abantwana
Sibaqukuqela sibasa entabeni
Besisenza amadoda okumela eli lizwe.
Hayi imbunye nembudede yentw'esiyibona kulemihla.
Elankhw'ilizwi ke, hleze lingathetha
Kobakh'umtha welanga.
Thetha ke ngoba thina
Sizakv'ukuthetha kwakho.

Siyiwelile ke imilambo,
Sizibonil'izinto.
Sasikho thina kwakuqala
Ngemihl'abelungu besiqhatha
Basinika utywala bebhotele

So speak to them.
For certainly your words
Will not be in vain
Just as God the creator, Qamata⁶⁴
of our forefathers,
Pointed with his finger,
Choosing a man to lead others,
So to your voice he turns his ear.
Listen well! And make things right for us.

Our Africa is crying.
It wants men with back bones,
It needs men with bold voices
To right things with their words.

Speak then,
For God pointed at you first.
Speak so that the children of this nation can hear you,
Speak so that your forefathers' nation may do as you ask,
For when you've spoken, things will fall into place.

In the days when we filed into the mountains
with our children, kindling fires,
We made strong men for this world.
There was not the confusion we see now.
Raise your voice then, that your speaking
May bring a ray of sun.
Speak to us,
That we may hear your words.

We've crossed the rivers,
We've seen many things.
We were here even in the beginning
When White people arrived to cheat us
They delivered alcohol in bottles

⁶⁴ UQamata: The amaXhosa god (whereas the Christian god is uThixo).

De wath'uMqhayi,
Ngubani nalo? NguYeye.
Uhamba nabani?
Noyise. Umpbathe ntoni?
Amasi. Ngendeb'enjani?
Ebomvu.

Kaloku ngalo mihla
Umlungu ufike esiteketisa ngebhotile.
Sathi sokuy'jonga
Safika ifanekile ngathi ngumfundisi
Engen'ecaweni
Sathi kuzakulunga kanti kumhla konakala

Khalime ke ukuze siy'bhebhetha,
Hayi ngobubi kodwa ngok'qiqa kwengqondo.
Chulak'ukunyathela
Ngoba abakowenu bath'inkos'itheth'apha
Suke batolike phaya.

Nathi sikho ke. Okuthethileyo,
Whina sohamba nako siye ezizweni.

Until Mqhayi⁶⁵ said,
Who is this? It is Yeye.
Who is walking with him?
His father. What has he brought for me?
Sour milk. What is the colour of the container?
It is red.

In those days
A White man came to charm us with a bottle.
As we gazed
It became as beautiful as a church minister
Entering the church.
We said things will improve, but things got worse.

Lament then and banish it,
Not with misery but diplomacy.
And tread with care,
For though the chief says this,
the people chase that.

Here we are. What you say
we'll take to the people.

⁶⁵ Mqhayi: An imbongi and historian; a major literary figure of the early twentieth century.

Address to King Zwelonke 11 March 2016

Imbongi: A! Zwelonke

Abantu: A! Zwelonke

Imgongi: A! Zwelooooonke!

Abantu: A! Zwelonke!

Mntan'omhle

Amehl'am ath'akukhangela ndabon'imilambo

Ndathi ndakujonga ngaphesheya

Ndazibon'iinkomo zako kwenu

Ndazibon'iinkomo zako kwethu

Ndiyazaz'ezako kwenu

Ndiyazaz'ezako kwethu

Ndiyazehlula ngemibala

Kuba zingaphesheya kwemilambo zicacile.

Zicacile zizakuhle

Zibonakala ngok'tyhobo

Ewe kaloku!

Yithi khe ndicaphule ndenjenje

Ngoba kaloku ukuze kulunge maLawundini

Vumani kuba sendiliphethibhozo

Ndabel'izizwe

Vumani kaloku

Ndabel'iQamata

Ndabel'umhlaba kalok'omagqagala

Ndabela kaloku umhlaba kaloku wakulo Daliwonga

Kuba kaloku kulapho zaphuma khon'iinkomo

Zaqweqwema zad'amathafa

Zafika kwaChotho zamila

Imbongi: Hail! Zwelonke

Audience: Hail! Zwelonke

Imbongi: Hail!Zwelooooonke!

Audience: Hail!Zwelonke!

Honorable one,⁶⁶

Opening my eyes, I saw rivers.

When I looked across

I saw your family's cattle,

I saw my family's cattle.

I know those of your family

I know those of my family.

I know them by their colours⁶⁷

for even across the river they are distinct.

They are beautifully distinct

They appear now, charging.

Yes then!

Let me say something

For in order for things to improve, maLawundini,⁶⁸

Allow me, for I already have the knife.

I distributed among nations.

Allow me then,

I gave to Qamata.⁶⁹

I gave the land with its dry boulders.

I gave the land from Daliwonga's⁷⁰ family

From which the cattle came,

Running to the fields.

They reached Chotho and stopped,

⁶⁶ Mntan'omhle: Literally, "Beautiful child."

⁶⁷ Cattle colours are particular to clan.

⁶⁸ "MaLawundini" is someone without a tradition or custom who wants to fit in somewhere. The term is sometimes offensive but is not meant to be so in this case. It could mean that the King may feel like amalawundini because the imbongi is going to say things that he may not understand.

⁶⁹ In this case, the town of Qamata (iQamata) rather than the god (uQamata).

⁷⁰ The family includes Kaiser Daliwonga Mathanzima, who was installed as chief of the Transkei by the apartheid government.

Zabuya nentombi
Yafika yazal'amadodana

returning with a girl.⁷¹
She arrived and gave birth to young boys.

Namhla ke kuthi mandithi
Ukuze kulunge kum
Zikho kalok'iinkomo zakulo Mvuzo
Zikho kalok'iinkomo zakulo Thambekile
Nawe nkonyana yakulo Thambekile
Yithi ndithi rhuthu
Nang'umwangelala ndikwabele

Today I want to say only
That things are well with me.
There are the cattle from Mvuzo's family,
There are the cattle from Thambekile's family.
And you, calf of Thambekile's family,
Let me take out
These scattered coins to share with you.⁷²

Ewe kaloku!
Ukuze kulunge maLawundini
Vumani kaloku ndiwele kalok'imilambo,
Ndiwel'uMbashe, ndiwele iXuka
Ndinyuke kaloku ngoMkhonkotho.
Ndakufika phezu kwentaba
Ndivul'amaphiko
Ndime kaloku ndixel'intsikiz'im'emaweni
Iqhayise'amahahane
Isithi mna ndihluthi
Ndihluth'amaqonya
Kazi wena hahane uyakurhayisa ngantoni na
Kuhluth'intsundwan'enje.

Yes then!
So that things will be well, maLawundini,
Allow me to cross these rivers.
I crossed the Mbashe, I crossed the Xuka
And ascended Mkhonkotho.⁷³
I arrived at the top of the mountain,
Opened my wings
And stood on the cliffs commanding as a hornbill
Boasting to the hadedas,
Saying I am full,
I'm full of maqonya.⁷⁴
I wonder, what would you boast about, hadeda?⁷⁵
Since it is so full, that dark brown one.

Kulapho kaloku

So that is where

⁷¹ i.e., The cattle were the lobola (bride price) for the girl from Chocho.

⁷² "Umwangelala" refers to dispersed objects generally; it is interesting to note the correspondence between money and cattle in Kropf's (1915) definition: "Grain thrashed out and lying spread on the floor; small money scattered about, cattle dispersed". The word also captures the fact that the coins are abundant, befitting to the recipients status.

⁷³ Near Centane.

⁷⁴ Amaqonya are large, green and silver caterpillars of the emperor moth that feed on the mimosa thorn-bushes (Kropf, 1915). Traditionally, the caterpillars, which can grow to ten centimetres, are an important food source for people and birds alike. As Kropf describes, "The boys kill it by inverting the head and thus pressing out the intestines; they then roast and eat the remainder". Although a different species, amaqonya are analogous to the more familiar mopane worms, a major protein source throughout southeast Africa.

⁷⁵ The mispronunciation in the isiXhosa (the correct word is uyakuqhaisa) is for alliterative effect, echoing the smoother aspirated h's of "hahane" and "kuhluthi" rather than interrupting these mellifluous sounds with a hard palatal click.

Zikhoy'iinkomo zakulo Biya
Kulapho kaloku
Zikhoy'iinkomo zakulo Mgangatho
Ukuze kulunge kaloku
Nawe nkonyana kaDaluxolo
Vuma ndithi kuwe sendikho.

The cattle of Biya's family are.
So that is where
The cattle of Mgangatho's family are.
So that things will be well then
Even you, lamb of Daluxolo,
Let me say it fell, but I am still here.

Yima kaloku! Ungayiyizeli
Kuba hlez'ubhideke.
Akufane kuyiyizelwe ngemihl'enje
Ngoba kaloku imihl'enje
Yeyokuba kukhutshw'iinyaniso
Zibekw'elubala badl'abantu
Ngoba kaloku
Abantu badla mhla ngatheko
Kuba kalok'amazw'angawo
Ngaw'afanel'abantwana beenkosi
Ukuze bave ngeendlebe zabo
Benze kulung'esizweni

Wait now! Don't celebrate
For you may be confused.
Times like these aren't for celebrating,
Times like these
Are for revealing truths,
Putting them on the surface for people to eat
For, you see,
People eat when there is an event⁷⁶.
Thus, encouraging words
Are most suitable for chief's children
For they attend well with their ears
And act, returning the nation to normal.

Kube mnandi kokwethu kube chosi kubehele
Sigide siguye sidindithe
Kube mnandi kokwethu si thetsul'oMayeka
Kube mnandi kokwethu
Sidle kube mnandi
Sityibilik'ebhotolweni.

So that we'll enjoy and be happy.
We'll dance, sing and clap.
We'll enjoy and Mayekas will take heed,
And be happy at home.
We'll eat and enjoy,
Falling as the ground grows slick with butter.⁷⁷

Yima kaloku nkonyana kaXolilizwe
Nas'isizwe sakokwenu
Kuba kaloku!
Sewumanangananga nje, zizadwendwe
Kukwaphuka kwemikhonto yamaphakathi
Esilwel'ooyihlo

Wait, bull calf of Xolilizwe⁷⁸
Here is your nation.
For then!
If you are adorned with colourful guests
It is because of the spears of your councillors,
Broken in the fight for your fathers.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ This stanza contains a veiled warning that the King should remain vigilant as many people are jealous of his position and may seek to undermine, dethrone or even kill him.

⁷⁷ i.e., There is abundant rich food, reflecting the kingdom's wealth.

⁷⁸ Xolilizwe: Zwelonke's father

⁷⁹ i.e., Many people fought and died to that you could be comfortable in your position.

Kukwaphuka kwemikhonto yamadoda
 Esilwel'eli lizwe
 Ukuze kaloku kubekhon'indoda
 Ikhonjw'ibene yenz'izinto
 Phakathi kwamany'amadoda
 Kuthiwe lo ndod'ukubizwa kwayo yikumkani.
 Ukuze kukholiseke kophezulu
 Yithobeleni ke kuba kakad'ayizibeke
 Yakhonjwangomnwe woQamat'owayekho kwakudaladala

It is because of men's spears, broken
 In the fight for this country
 So that there can be a man,
 A willow spear thrown down to do things
 Among other men,
 And that man is called their king.
 To please the one above
 Obey him, for he did not appoint himself.
 He was appointed by Qamata who has always existed.

Thetha ke!
 Nas'isizwe sakokwenu
 Nas'isizwe sezizwe
 Nas'isizwe sakulo Mcothama
 Nas'isizwe sakulo Dwayi
 Nas'isizwe kaloku sakulo Ndlambe
 Kuba kaloku wena kwedin'uyingqalo
 Kwamhla mnene kwazalwa tanc'indoda
 Yathi gqolo ukuzal'amany'amadoda
 Ukuze kalok'amany'azalwa kuzikunene
 namaqad'ayiphahle
 Namhla k'akuphahlil'amaqad'akokwenu

Speak then!
 Here is your nation.
 Here is the nation of nations.
 Here is the nation of Mcothama,
 Here is the nation of the Dwayi family,
 Here is the nation, then, from the Ndlambe family,
 For you, young man, are the beginning.
 Even before the man was born
 And it carried on raising other men
 In order those from other polygamous⁸⁰
 And from young polygamous protect him.
 Today your brothers from your father's other wives
 surround you.⁸¹

Namhlak'isizwe sakokwenu siyakuvumela ngazwi nye
 Yolul'isandla njengemihla yoyihlo
 Njengemihl'oyihlo bawel'imilambo
 Bolul'iizandla banquml'iiphonoshono
 Nephesheya kweNciba
 Belul'iizandla yadabuk'um dangala
 Namhla ke kwedini yima
 Ngoba kaloku
 Ngendalo kwavunywa k'qala
 Akungakuzalwa tanci
 Koko kungokuzalwa ngokwesiko

Today your nation agrees in one voice.
 Extend your hand as in the days of your fathers
 As in the days when your fathers crossed the rivers,
 Extending their hands they stopped on the near side
 Then crossed over the Kei.
 Extending their hands, laziness was gone.
 Today then, young man, stand
 For, you see,
 In nature it was agreed before:
 It is not by being a first born,
 It is only by traditional right's birth.

⁸⁰ This refers to the Right Hand wife, whose son is the heir apparent.

⁸¹ Illustrates both the value of polygamy when these siblings are loyal and the potential danger when they are not. These brothers may plot against the King or his mother.

Yingoko ke kwedini ndisitsho
Ngegunya loyihlo yima
Nank'uyihlo mncinci
Namhla melulel'izandla
Namhla mambathise
Ukuz'isizwe sivume
Sithi ngomnwe wakho kwenzeka
Ukuz'abakh'apha namhlanje
Baqalis'ukubek'imbali

Nathi ke siyavuma
Sithi beka ngob'izinto zale mihla ziyabhida
Hlez'usakuvilapha
Bakungene ngasemva kwedini bakugawule.

Kuba banjal'abantu
Namhla bakubeka phezulu
Kanti ngomso baya kugawula bakudl'izithende
Kodwa k'asizok'thetha lo nt'apha
Sith'ekho nj'uQamata
Likhw'izwi lakho nje
Wakukhomba ngomnwe wakho nje
Uyakuthetha kwedini kulunge

Thetha ke, nathi sikho
Ngezeth'iingqondo neendlebe simamele
Sakuva ke sixelel'abanye
Sithi namhl'ithethil'inkonyana yesizwe
Yath'uk'thetha yegqabagqaba yegqabagqaba
Kazi lelaphin'elirhanuga?
Kweewu!

That's why I'm saying, young man,
By the authority of your fathers⁸²
Here is your uncle.⁸³
Today extend him your hands,
Today cover him
So that as a nation we can agree
And say that by your finger it happened,
For the ones present today
Begin this history.

We also agree,
We say respect, for things of these times are perplexing.
If you become lazy here,
They'll stab you from behind, young man, and chop you
down.

For people are like that,
Today they place you on high,
But tomorrow they will chop and eat your heels.⁸⁴
But we won't speak of that here.
We say that while Qamata lives
And your voice is present
You will point with your finger
And speak, young man, and all will be well.

Speak then, we are also present.
With our minds and our ears we listen.
We'll hear you tell others
We'll say today the calf of the nation has spoken.
He said these few words, few words.⁸⁵
I wonder, who is this one with such nonsense?
My goodness!⁸⁶

⁸² That is, his father and his father's brothers, who are also his fathers in amaXhosa tradition.

⁸³ Mncinci: specifically, an uncle from the father's side.

⁸⁴ An expression meaning that people will gossip negatively, preventing one from moving forward.

⁸⁵ Note the flourish of crowd-pleasing alliteration as the poem reaches its conclusion.

⁸⁶ Kweewu: A word with many possible meanings, such as: we'll see what happens; hope for the best; who knows?

Address to Chief Mthetho 11 March 2016

Kukub'izinto zisuka zigqwetheke
Zithi bezifane'ukuba beziphethwe sisandla sokunene
Zisuke ziphamb'isandla
Singene kwesokunxele

Vuma mntan'enkosi
Mabini mathathu ndigoduke
Kuba ndinganga ndingafuman'amazw'okubik'ekhaya

Ndikhe ndanxunguphala
Kuba suke ndabonga phakathi kwamarhanuga
Ndathi ndithetha nje
Ab'eman'ukuphikel'ethi gram

Zen'khe nithule marhanuga
Kuba kuthi le nto yimpilo
Nakufak'amazwi athint'iindlebe zethu
Embilinini kuthi kuyonakala
Ukuze ndiphile ke mntan'omhle
Vuma nawe ndenjenje
Le ngub'uyambetheyo
Asingubo yakho
Kub'ukh'oyilindeleyo ngasemva

Ewe kaloku
Isikhundl'okuso kwedini
Sasikhe sahlal'omny'umntu ngaphambili
Kuba kakade
Le nt'umntu yinto yalo nto, ngumngcelele
Ngemihla oyihl'omkhulu aba besilw'iimfazwe
Bevul'umhlaba ukuze balime, wawusewukho

Kuba kakade
Ngemihla kwedini

Things just become a mess.
They were to be carried by the right hand
But they confuse the hand and escape,
Moving on to the left.

Allow me, honourable one,
These few words and then I'll go home.
For I hope for a few encouraging words to say
to those at home.

I was troubled
For, rising to bonga among the ignorant people,
I saw as I was speaking
That they disputed while I spoke.

Could you please keep quiet, ignorant people,
For to us this is life.
When we hear you
It becomes a mess in our spirits.
In order for me to be healthy, honourable one,
Allow me to do this.
This blanket that covers your body
Is not yours,
For someone behind you waits for it.

Yes, then,
The position you occupy, young man,
Belonged to someone else before.
For it is true,
People are like that, there is always a queue.
The days when your forefathers were in a war,
Opening up the ground to plough, you already existed.

For it is true
In those days, young man,

URhili eleqwa ngamadlagusha
Wawukho use sinqeni kuye
Yima ke uthi gomololo
Kub'imits'oyakuyenza namhla
Hlez'ixolis'ilizwe kwimihl'elandelayo
Kuba kwakunjalo kwakuqala

Le nt'iyindoda yint'okuphile'enyene
Ukuze kulunge kaloku
Phila namhla, uphilel'abazayo
Kub'akunto ukutya kwendod'ibhukuxe
Ilibal'intokokuba iinkomo zayo
Zikhangelwe zizinja ngaphandle
Yity'ushiye zity'izinja zikhonkothe

Yima ke uthi gomololo
Le nt'umnt'umzi kwedin'ayincekelelwa
Khe ndamv'umzukulwana kaMvuz'esitsho ngeny'imini
Uz'ungasingcekeleli k'isizwe
Uz'usibambe ngezandla zozibini
Kuba kaloku, amava nembali ngawe
Iyakwaxhiwa ngamadod'owakhokeleyo

Yima ke, uxhas'ikokwenu
Kuba kwedini angathi abhatyaz'umntan'omhle
Ziyakukhonjwa kuwe
Ngamadod'alandela ngasemva
Kuba namhla solul'iizandla nje
Uzakhel'iintsika zokuwel'imilambo
Imilamb'enyiwelay'izel'amatye alucolothi
Uz'ume ke
Umxhas'uxhathise
Ukuz'igama lakokwenu lingacimi
Imb'indod'ethi iphunga nje
Ib'ijonge ngaphesheya kuba ziyonakal'izinto
Uz'ume ke, uzinz'ukhange'ucokis'ukunyathela

Rhili was chased by sheep eaters⁸⁷
And you existed already in his loins.
Stand firm, then,
For what you will do today
Could please the nation in days to come,
For it has been so before.

Men are meant to live for others.
For things to be well then
Live these days for the ones who have yet to come,
For it is not right for a man to eat too much
And forget that his cattle
Are tended by the dogs outside.
Don't finish the food, but let the dogs eat and bark.

Stand tall then,
You cannot put a house on your head
I heard Mvuzo's grandchild saying that one day.
Don't put the nation on your head
You should hold it with both hands,
Because experience and your history
Will be built by the men you are leading.

Stand, then, and look after your home,
For if you, honourable one, make a mistake,
You will be blamed
By men who are behind you
For today as we are just stretching our hands
You are building strong foundation to cross rivers.
The rivers you are crossing are full of slippery stones.
You should stand then
And support him, stand strong
So that your family's name will continue.
It is not good for a man to just sit drinking tea
while he looks across, for things are messy.
Be strong then and careful

⁸⁷ White people

Kub'umzil'okhonjwayo
Ngumzila wezilwanyan'ezicokis'ukunyathela
Yima ke uthethe ungenzi mazwi maninzi
Kub'asikubekelanga kuthetha
Sikubekel'ukwenza.
Yenza ke, sibone sibuke.
Thina mbongi sibonge
Kub'ukuthetha kokwethu kakade.

For the direction that is pointed
Is the direction of cautious animals.
Stand then and speak, but not too much
For we've not appointed you to speak,
But appointed you to act.
Act then, for all to see.
We the iimbongi will bonga
For speech is certainly ours.