

# Circulating narratives: Theorizing narrative travel, translation and provocation

When I received the set of four essays from Hugo Canham<sup>1</sup>, I was deeply humbled by the trust and then swept by the responsibility of “translation”. A white woman in North America, trained as a social psychologist and critical participatory researcher, I was asked to reflect on a quartet of provocative articles created by talented writers from the Global South, who have carefully interpreted rich interviews voiced by South Africans narrating pain, poverty, violence and exclusion during apartheid and since, speaking through pride, desire and resistance. Across these textured layers of telling, listening and writing, the narratives sailed across oceans and over the equator, in search of yet another translation, to be offered up to audiences both near and far. With the modest transfer of texts, together we agree to delicately stitch a transnational project of resistance, re-vision, and responsibility – fraught and important.

It is this delicate process of circulating narratives, *passing on* stories, laying on of hands local and far away, that deserves some thought. This short reflective essay is an invitation to theorise the historically colonial but also sometimes loving travels of narratives as stories of survivance (Vizenor, 2008). In this case, the stories are borne in the bodies of those most aggrieved as they journey through the hands and ears and fingertips of these South African theorists / researchers to a white North American woman who spent time in South Africa last summer, in the mo(u)rning after Donald Trump’s victory.

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I write in conversation with these essays on the day called “Thanksgiving” in the United States, cast as a national holiday, as if the settler colonial Whites and the Natives on US land were “consensually” and joyfully celebrating the conquest. Thanksgiving has always been a hegemonic distortion of history to glorify the White saviour. But 2016 marked a particularly tragic and ironic moment. Thousands of Natives gathered at Standing Rock Dakota to protest, in sub-freezing weather, to protect sacred lands and water from corporate exploitation. They were brutally assaulted by water cannons and militarised police.

And so I ask: In deeply revolting times, how do we caress, interpret, honour and “translate” stories of state and social violence, across history and geography? How do we write / research in ways that provoke critical reflection on the past, situate geographically and historically lives in the present but also reveal the circuits of oppression and resistance that link us, and incite potential solidarities for moving us collectively forward?

### **On the radical possibilities of translation and the haunting anxieties of the colonial project**

To the preceding question, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, reflecting on the **World Social Forum**, has argued for the “work of translation”. The **World Social Forum**, he writes, “holds out the hope that another world is possible ... but reveals the diversity of social struggles fighting against neoliberal globalization ... and calls for a giant work of translation ... to build articulation, aggregation and coalition” (2005: 15-22). As we consider the circulation of narratives through these transnational and translational storms as a (provisionally) linked journey of re-vision, we must, in the first order, recognise the long racist colonial history of social scientists stealing stories, photos, artifacts, blood, bones, cranial measurements, texts and sacred memories from people of colour/oppression like low hanging fruit available for the picking; the White appropriation of and profiteering from texts (and music, fashion, labour) authored by Black and Brown people; the hawking of “oppression stories” in a global market hungry for poverty-porn, “broken bodies,” violence against women and stories of “resilience” in the face of torture (Behar, 1993; McKittrick, 2015; Wynter, 2015). I have no desire to paper over this history / contemporary practice of academic colonialism. But I also want to appreciate delicately and critically the collective transnational *movement of narratives* – literally the journey *and* the political mobilisation of stories – embedded deeply in local contexts and then curated strategically for audiences and actions well beyond.

South African social theorist and researcher Puleng Segalo (2015) has written on Black South African women’s embroideries as “texts” that sail around the globe, telling stories of racialised and gendered violence and silence, but also of love and hope,

designed for knowing local audiences and relatively naïve customers far away. Her writing opens a conversation about *how* texts travel, in her case, visual texts; how they circulate and translate over borders, markets, profit, skin, from Global South to North. As Segalo opens this discussion, it seems important that those of us working with narratives also theorise the circulation and translation as a strategic, and delicate, social *movement*.

If this is, in part, what we do when we co-produce narratives, analyse and publish, when we pass them around globally, refusing the National Geographic version of circulating images, then we must pause to think through the critical elements of this practice.

Said differently, in these turbulent times, how do we – academics, researchers, practitioners, writers, artists, journalists, teachers – share, historicise, situate *in place* and also translate *across place* stories of State and social violence? As we collectively ache under varied enactments of neoliberal globalisation and authoritarian State regimes, rage against the upward distribution of global capital and swelling of inequality gaps, view again and again state violence against Black bodies, as we bear witness to the exhausted bodies of refugees that float up on our shores or crawl under barbed wire at our borders, our obligation – maybe particularly those of us in the Global North - is to respect and situate the stories, but consider, “What is this an instance of?” that may resonate even in far away places. As Cynthia Kros (2017) writes (in this issue), we can not allow these stories to “disappear into thin air” *and*, I would add, we should not allow them to appear to be so particularized as to say nothing across global borders for these stories from South Africa reveal much about global dynamics or racial capitalism that swirl and choke in our increasingly “small” world.

And so the question for this short essay, what is Narrative desire in revolting times? What do we seek to accomplish as narratives circulate, and each of us leaves an interpretive fingerprint on the text, as each text slices a small paper cut into our souls? There is rich guidance in the four essays you have just read and sweet wisdom from one of my sheroes, feminist philosopher Maxine Greene.

### **Narrative desires: Aesthetic encounters and provocations**

As we conjure “narrative desires”, let us return to what John Dewey, and later Maxine Greene called *aesthetic encounters* designed to “awaken” and “disrupt” dominant stories. Referencing people’s engagement with the arts, Greene distinguished *aesthetic* from *anaesthetic* encounters. Anaesthetic experiences numb the senses, dilute and flatten affect, and render observers passive. Aesthetic experiences, in contrast, awaken people by breaking habitual ways of thinking and behaving; inducing ways to see things differently an experience she called “wide-awakeness.” Maxine helped us widen

the imagination through aesthetic encounters as “an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what is there to be noticed, and to lend works of art their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful” (Greene, 2001: 6). She might, if she were still alive, ask that we read this volume aesthetically, to understand what is being offered about very particular situated experiences and then to consider how circuits of violence, privilege, capital, White supremacy, dispossession and resistance link our varied contexts.

I might add: how do we write in ways that poke readers toward wide-awakeness; how do we situate narrative texts in history and place – as these writers have done – *and also* theorize the material so that readers may consider theoretical transnational links? Might we imagine how our essays rooted in narratives, could lean toward the aesthetic, stretching toward the provocative translation?

### **The works in context: Looking inward and radiating out**

To begin: These essays tell poignant stories of pain, poverty, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, state violence and exclusion during apartheid and since. That already is a hard story for North American progressives (myself included until I was schooled by Jill Bradbury, Garth Stevens, Hugo Canham, Puleng Segalo, and others) who valorise the fall of Apartheid and remain ignorant of the deeply troubling aftermath. And yet these narratives also convey wisdom, pride, and what Sara Ahmed (2004) would call “willful subjectivities” – a demand for justice at all costs – by mourning widows, Black lesbians, NEETs, Black women scientists, Black men entering young adulthood. The essays ask us to take seriously the stubborn particulars of place and history, where these narratives were co-created. And yet as Jill Bradbury (2017) writes (in this issue), “narrative is not a transparent route into the minds of storytellers or to the social world in which they live. Analysis always entails the tricky process of negotiating between orientations of trust and openness to fully hear participants’ accounts and critical distance that enables the researcher to go beyond what is said or even known by participants themselves.” These researchers create vivid landscapes within which the narratives are planted. Below I review each essay, and then muse about how “aesthetic provocations” might stretch the texts a bit so that they look “inward” and also radiate out.

Cynthia Kros (2017) offers an analytically exquisite examination of widows’ testimonies at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and then twenty years later at the Farlam (Marikana) Commission of Inquiry. The essay is shaped to answer Gayatri Spivak’s famous question, “Can the subaltern – the widows of Marikana – speak?” Kros explores how the women, in both Commissions, positioned themselves

as witnesses, victims and survivors; as mourning, as wives of noble and relentless men, as mothers of traumatised children, as exiles and “non-women” in their home communities. With critical analytic skill, juxtaposing the TRC and Farlam testimonies, Kros reveals how the women creatively subverted the dominant scripts circulating about their husbands, the mining company, the union and about themselves. They contested the representations of their husbands as “hooligans” and “dangerous criminals,” and opened the traumatic wounds of children asking “when will daddy come home?” Kros concludes that indeed the subaltern can, and does, speak – with courage and conviction, building on the narratives of 20 years earlier and now archived as a foundation for women yet to come.

Kros’ stunning essay on the performance of narrative in litigious contexts, pries open the question of narrative reception: If the subaltern can speak, under what conditions do dominant authorities listen and hear? When do narratives prevail as evidence of wrongdoing? When the crime is anti-Black state violence, who are worthy audiences? And what are the personal and social consequences for those who testify when their narratives of pain and violence are rejected as not valid or illegitimate (as the Black lesbian women in Hugo Canham’s (2017) paper report)?

Kros’ work invites us to consider – when does evidence convince, particularly evidence about State violence against Black bodies? As I read Kros I thought about the endless stream of devastating videos of White police officers in the US shooting / choking / humiliating / maiming Black women and men, and the relative absence of guilt convictions against the police in court. These graphic displays of state violence against Black bodies were no surprise to communities of colour in the US and “shocking” to most whites. Indeed, the subaltern can speak, but who is listening? What is needed to unsettle the State’s (and elite Whites’) refusal to hear? Kros’ work is elegantly set in South African struggles and yet the global echoes of State refusal to acknowledge violence against historically oppressed peoples make me shiver as water cannons douse Natives in the US, long aggrieved and never heard.

In the spirit of aesthetic provocation and translation: this paper leaves open epistemological and ethical questions about *critical narrative reception* – Are publics and commissions growing narrative weary, saturated in oppression stories and developing resistant defences? If so, how do social theorists, researchers, and writers pierce the hermetic refusal to acknowledge State violence, in very specific places and also across?

Malose Langa (2017, in this issue) offers a tender longitudinal portrait of 32 young Black teens negotiating “masculinities” in 2007 and then documented 12 “becoming

men” over nine years in a working class community in the Alexandra Township. Using photo elicitation methods, Langa tells multi-media stories, a thick blend of photos and interviews, moving across time, crafting life stories that counter the dominant script, situated exquisitely in place, loss, social relations and in desires. From 13-18 and then 23-26, the young men grew up in the “new” and not so new at all South Africa, surrounded by high unemployment and harsh economic realities. Their bodies grew shock absorbers to contend with “repetitive losses” of brothers and fathers, and the disappointment that the fall of Apartheid did not mark the fall of racialised and classed oppression. Simon reminds us there is “no going back to normal” and yearns to have a baby to “refill that space” where the deaths of brother and father left empty. William narrates a sweet story of his deep intimacy with his mother, challenging the dominant narrative of the single mother poorly equipped to raise children. And Marcus tells Langa that the narrative interviews gave him the confidence, over time, to come out as gay. Langa accompanies the young men through difficult developmental milestones, as they sculpt stories that stand in dramatic contrast to the dominant story of the wasted, delinquent life of Black masculinities in the years of late adolescence in South Africa.

Langa does a fine job of looking “inward” into the rich, complex lives of these young men in the South Africa context; but the stories of these young men also radiate “outward.” Langa tells us that, “Many couldn’t finish tertiary diplomas” because of financial constraints. With hours of interview material and 678 photos, this project humanises a sprawling global issue of un/under/sporadic employment of structurally marginalised young people (15-34 years of age) and rising costs of higher education. While these young men embody the specific dynamics of growing up in a working class community in South Africa in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, they are also canaries in the racialised / classed / gendered neoliberal mine. Millions of young men and women globally can’t finish college because of financial constraints. Many are protesting (for example, in South Africa, Chile) and many join the growing ranks of NEETS (Not in Employment, Education or Training) across the globe, for example, in Japan, the UK and the US.

South African stories of youth alienation and struggle have much to teach those of us in fragile, failing, and fracturing democracies where swelling inequality gaps and State sanctioned anti-Black violence deeply affect youth development, shifting masculinities, mental health, education and the social landscape of violence. Just after the Trump election, Nik Dawes (2016), a South African journalist, wrote an open letter to North American journalists, offering “advice” in the **Columbia Journalism Review** (16 November 2016):

*“Dear friends in American journalism,*

*Ordinarily, it is you who offer the rest of the world advice about press freedom, and the accountability architecture of democratic societies, so I understand that it may be strange to hear it coming back at you, but this will not be the last inversion that the election of Donald Trump delivers ... But one thing you don't have, is experience of what to do when things start to get genuinely bad.*

*Take it from those of us who have worked in places where the institutional fabric is thinner, the legal protections less absolute, and the social license operate less secure ...”*

In this open letter, Dawes reverses the hegemonic direction of “advice” and exports wisdom-borne-in-struggle *from* South Africa *to* the US. In a generous extrapolation from the South African context outward, South African scholars and activists have much to teach those of us in the Global North.

In the spirit of aesthetic provocation, I would love to imagine, for instance, a critical, transnational participatory action research project designed by under/un-employed youth, and young people forced out of higher education because of finances from South Africa, working with youth from the US, Chile, Japan and UK (and beyond?). What kinds of evidence would they generate in terms of critique of current economic and educational policy, and what kinds of policy possibilities might they recommend for economic and educational justice?

In the struggle to decolonise the field and praxis of psychology, and reverse the flows of knowledge from the Global South to the North, the careful inward looking at these South African narratives should be tithed to the dare-ful willingness to theorise out to privileged and disenfranchised contexts far away, and still stung by shared global dynamics.

Working with a very distinct group of participants who grew up in the same racial-geographic-economic space as Langa's young men, but threatened always with heteronormative assault, Hugo Canham (2017, in this issue) carves a narrative space for Black lesbian women. Canham seeks to re-present “narratives of becoming” squeezed in the fissures of “South Africa lust and greed”, and these women seem to trust Canham fully with rich reflections on past, present and future. With a strong intersectional framework, they analyse how race, sexuality and gender tangle on the ground in a nation with the most sexually progressive constitution in the world. They narrate everyday fears for their lives and the lives of other women; they refuse assimilation and they march boldly for radical recognition and queer justice.

As Cynthia Kros wove stories into litigious histories, and Malose Langa spliced narratives with photos, Hugo Canham juxtaposed interviews with mapping – reminding us that stories and place are intimately woven. In the lives of Black lesbian women in South Africa, navigating what Canham calls queer geographies, comfort and safety are always racialised, classed and sexualised in space. Living as a Black lesbian woman in South Africa is framed as “constant resistance, transgression and vulnerability”. Even within the South African PRIDE movement, Black lesbian women have been forced to create their own spaces, where they can enjoy “Just the idea of being in the sun”. They founded One in Nine and disrupted Pride 2012 to mark lesbian women deaths and re-politicise the struggle for queer justice.

These beautiful and jarring narratives remind us of lives lived in quiet and loud resistance: “When white and wealthy members of the LGBTI community annually celebrate the legislative freedoms of living in Johannesburg, Black lesbian women point to the elision of their experience and the inequality between wealthy safe identities and their own disposable bodies. They opt for a People’s Pride in spaces where they are most likely to be violated such as townships and Hillbrow ... Alongside their transgressive performance of identities, they assert a pride and self-love that defies and re-appropriates terms such as ‘dirty lesbians’”. And yet – Randi tells us, “*I just don’t think we have anything, I mean marriage, nah! I can marry another woman but it’s also okay, I can get killed and no one gets arrested*”. Randi continues, “*I die and I get raped and I still see my rapist every day, my rapist passes by, everybody will see he’s the one who raped me, I had evidence, everything is done but no one is arresting him because he raped a lesbian. I get to face my hell every day.*”

We hear what it means to experience racialised and gendered betrayal in the general hetero-normative society and also *within* the radical margins of the LGBTI movement. We feel the rage, sadness and fear when women reveal deep sexualised violence and others’ refusal to hear, and in these narratives we also bear witness to a sustained, collective conviction to resist, transgress and “express themselves with the very bodies that are under threat”. Canham’s essay stands as a bold archive of the collective refusal to silence, and the equally fierce insistence that *these* stories be folded into the biography of the not yet fulfilled promises of the new South Africa. Canham helps us imagine stories as resources for the generation to come, in the struggle for a queer justice of recognition (Fraser, 2000). This essay provokes, no doubt, even the most removed reader and yet I yearned to know more about the banal violence in South Africa, and would hope for Canham to push these stories to tell an even bigger story about intra-group dynamics of splitting, stratification and degradation along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality and the refusal to assimilate.

First, between the lines of Canham's essay lies a seething set of affects – violence, fear, vulnerability to brutality from men – embodied by these women but not fully developed. It is painful to read but not entirely easy to understand the depth of hetero-normative violence; the raping of lesbian women or similar threats. I recognize this is a mark of my own ignorance, but when these stories “travel” there is a taken-for-grantedness about banal violence in South Africa that may need elaboration for readers to appreciate the affects which these women carry in their very being.

I appreciate that Garth Stevens (2016) has been writing about violence in South Africa as a socio-political-cultural dynamic in need of theorizing (and not just quick intervention). But in this context of Black lesbian women negotiating layers of racialised, classed, gendered and hetero-normative violence from Black men, and from White members of the LGBTI community, as well as the larger social world, readers need to understand this context more fully to appreciate how/why these women carry such deep scars and fears of male violence. Readers outside South Africa in particular need to understand the huge space between the most progressive constitution in the world and life on the ground.

I hope that Canham will develop theoretically the *intra-group dynamic of racialised and gendered stratification and derogation* within the LGBTI movement. Looking inward, Canham does a fine job of helping us understand the internal politics of race / class / gender / sexuality within the movement, but again I can't help but notice that this dynamic is omnipresent. Racial, class and gender splits are devastating social justice movements around the globe: the pervasive race/class/gender fractures within the LGBTQI movement (for relevant writings in the US see Cohen, 2014; in China and Taiwan see Liu, Huang & Ma, 2016), and also within immigration rights struggles in the US (see Carmen, Arellano & Perez, 2016), racial divides within labour solidarities (Fletcher & Gapsin, 2009) or within feminist movements in the US (see Lorde, 1984).

Critical race theorist Jodi Melamed (2006) offers important theoretical insights about *neoliberal multi-culturalism* whereby “elites” within any social movement (Whites, wealthy, men, those engaged with a “politics of respectability” or those desiring assimilation rather than transformation) can be bought off and assimilated into the mainstream, as they distance from and disparage those who have been most smeared by dominant rhetoric. Canham's case study of Black lesbian women's righteous alienation from the mainstream LGBTI movement, their bold autonomous protests, their insistence on politicising the murders of Black lesbians and their conviction to march where vulnerability is most extreme, provides a rich case about the intra-group dynamics of assimilation and marginalisation, and even more powerfully of radical resistance from within.

Finally, Jill Bradbury (2017, in this issue) offers a rich exploration of narrative as theory-method, sketching a series of research projects in which narratives were gathered with young people described as NEETS (research by Haynes-Rolando, 2016), Black women scientists (research by Liccardo, 2015), young black women at the point of leaving high school and again a year later (research by Selohilwe, 2009) and the “repetitive stress injuries” that unfold as slow violence in the lives of young people growing up amidst the Marikana massacre (research by Moleba, 2016). With these narratives, researchers create visual displays for interrogating temporality, relationality and meaning across time and space. Bradbury and her colleagues / students introduce qualitative interview material and stunning visual representations of the narratives, anchored in time and relationships, as a strategy to represent the relation between the lived-life and the told-story. Contesting the metrics of narrative coherence and linearity, Bradbury explores how people speak their interview, not just what they say; how small ruptures of the everyday produce seemingly “incoherent” narratives, characterised by “stops and starts”. She values that interviews “jump back and forth in time” rendering the narrative line visible through a woven “story-maze” so that readers might notice not confusion but temporal flows in relation to history and future, relations of betrayal and support, events of enormous significance and everyday “stress fractures” on the soul. Discussing interviews gathered in the context of the Marikana massacre of 2012, Bradbury reminds readers that “This event ruptured the existing conversion narrative of the nation: the post-ness of Apartheid exposed as a lie in these brutal acts to maintain racialised inequalities of the status quo.” And yet Moleba encounters silence; stop-start failed attempts to speak in “staccato-like stuttering and rewinding repetitions.” Rather than discard these as “bad data”, or “incoherent narrators”, Bradbury and Moleba interrogate how trauma penetrates stories, reminding us of our responsibility to theorise how stories are told, not only which stories are told.

I was reminded of interviews we conducted years ago with women who had experienced domestic violence and killed their abusers. As in the case of the “repetitive stress fractures”, these women were hard to follow, and they spoke through similarly staccato, somewhat disjointed discourses. Only after multiple listenings was it clear to us that the women often told the story from the dead men’s perspective. I wish we had access then to Bradbury’s fresh theorising of stress fractures to recognise the fits and starts as evidence of trauma, rather than reasons to question the validity of the stories being told.

While so much of Bradbury’s essay is provocative, with respect to the material covered and the analytic strategies described, the article is most generative because she signals how research can “attend to the ways in which the grand narratives of history and socio-political life articulate with individual, personal lives or psychological realities”. And then she lifts up three “muddles” of narrative work: the problematic imposition of the “good”

narrative (read: linear and coherent) when working with people whose biographies have been structurally disrupted by the large and the small injustices of everyday life; the stretchy space of the “gap” between life and story; and researchers’ tendency to extract and individualise single narrators from context, history and relationships.

With a rich array of examples, Bradbury teaches us how to refuse the hegemonic frame of the good narrative, how to acknowledge the space between a life and a story, and how to resituate lives in context and history, a design move that Lois Weis and I have called “critical bifocality” (2012). Bradbury is particularly interested in how psychologists honour those experiences that are “difficult to articulate, perhaps due to trauma or other embodied experiences that are typically ‘beyond words’, rendering us speechless ... or when the storyteller(s) and audience must cross linguistic or other (classed, raced, gendered boundaries)”. She offers up visual analytic techniques so that researchers, and readers, may “see” patterns of connections not legible in talk alone. Bradbury’s contributions are many, but among my favourite is her expansion of Kierkegaard’s concern that, “Life is lived forwards but can only be understood backwards”, and her friendly call to write through history, critically explore nostalgia as the subjunctive space of “what might have been” and interrogate narratives to reveal the “opening up” of future spaces, even if they seem barren and formless.

As in all four papers, Bradbury’s cases are beautifully analysed from within the context of South Africa, but I yearn for a bit of interpretive courage to reach beyond the local, whereby these authors knead and stretch the wisdom that their essays radiate, for those of us labouring with narratives of trauma, desire, resistance and injustice in contexts quite distinct from South Africa have much to learn from these theorists. I elaborate below a few gifts gathered from these essays.

### **Contesting the “single story”: Refusing epistemological violence**

We know of course about “The danger of a single story,” as Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie argues, “The single story creates stereotypes”, Adichie says, “and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (2016: 87).

And so at base these essays stand in *textual solidarity* to resist the single story and contest the dominant lies being told about Black South Africans; refusing the embodied shame and structural silences that saturate. As Cynthia Kros tells us, “the women were determined against heavy odds to speak ... these widows knew very well that they were entering into an unequal combat against a dominant narrative forged by the very forces responsible for the deaths of their husbands and the exacerbation of their already straitened circumstances.” Fundamentally, these papers challenge the dominant story

being told about “dirty” lesbians; “hooligan” and dangerous miners; “barbaric” Black men; and individuals who are “resilient” despite generations of oppression.

These essays challenge not only the neoliberal insistence on the single story, but also the narrative “production” of the lone individual and the autonomous narrator. Bradbury reminds us that narrative is a deeply peopled project. Even in the interview scene, “Although we may be conducting a one-on-one interview, the person with whom we talk (and of course we ourselves as researchers too) carry into the room the voices of others. Human beings are never singular even when alone, constituted by the internalised others of our social world.”

These essays recognise our deep ontological entanglements with Others; with hegemonic representations; with audiences known and not; with the words of ancestors or murdered husbands / fathers / brothers / mothers long gone, and with our imaginaries of those who have yet to be borne.

But there is so much more that these talented writers accomplish.

### **Reflexivity: The labours of relationality and responsibility**

The writers not only complicate how we think about their informants, but they reveal to us the sweet and delicate labours of reflexivity, they worry about their never-good-enough relations with the women and men, and write on the existential weight of never-adequate representation. Hugo Canham worries he is an outsider, a male cisgender Black South African carrying in his belly the stories told by Black lesbians. Cynthia Kros “acknowledge[s] the suffering of all parties who were affected by what is now known as the Marikana massacre, even though I am unable to address them all in the present paper. I am also very aware that as I stepped out of the modest building in Braamfontein, Johannesburg ... after having completed my last interview for this phase of my project ... I was able to take a break from Marikana and its enduring anguish. For those I left behind me and their clients the difficult ‘journey’ that is Marikana goes on indefinitely.”

And yet in the very multi-method design of each piece, we can detect the careful design, bending toward a “full enough” representation of lives, as lived and as told.

Malose Langa delivers a text that braid photos and oral histories of Black men carving lives shadowed by dominant narratives about hyper-masculinity; Cynthia Kros curates “political widow” stories told at the TRC and then twenty years later at the Farlam Commission, trying to “hear” how these women position themselves, their murdered husbands and their children to challenge the representations of their slain husbands, to provoke recognition of the child as innocent container of trauma, and to narrate

their own political exile as they dared to don mourning garb two years after their men were slain. Hugo Canham creates an archive of struggle and resistance, anchored in the lives of Black lesbian women who transgress with courage, and fear; and Jill Bradbury midwives an understanding of narratives on the wings of Sankofa, the mythical bird that looks back while flying forward. Together these essays mourn “for those I left behind”; worry about “those I have misrepresented”; fear that “Individual agency may shift in the documenting of a life or narrating one’s self ... but this may not be enough.” And yet these writers have circulated and translated carefully narratives borne in pain and struggle; narratives produced against dominant stories of the Black man as lazy; the miner as barbaric; the black lesbian women as dirty; the children of Marikana as “incoherent”.

These writers deliver narratives of humanity struggling in inhumane contexts and they model for the rest of us the art of re-vision, curating narratives within historic landscapes to understand the strategic convictions of narratives generated for court, for history, for reparations and for movement building.

### **Narrative responsibilities: To situate in history and place, and to radiate beyond**

*“Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. ... That is called pentimento because the painter ‘repented’, changed his mind.”*

**Lillian Hellman (1973)**

Lillian Hellman reminds us that beneath any painting lies the original canvas; a base transformed; a mind changed; stories erased but not gone.

These four essays refract old stories on new canvas, asking readers to hold the stories and cultivate a sense of collective responsibility to see / feel / hear / act across the borders constructed by nation, corporate capital, demographics, state violence. The volume is an invitation to build an assemblage of stories in revolting times, just as Cynthia Kros delicately placed the Marikana political widow testimonies atop the TRC testimonies from 20 years prior, reminding us that “the TRC’s script was by no means as prescriptive as is imaged by many of the scholars who have critiqued it ... There was evidently room enough for Seipati to add her own soliloquy, ending with an uncompromising statement of her intention, delivered in the wake of a deeply affecting performance of unappeasable grief ...” And yet even with over 20 years of “democracy”, the word “massacre” and its synonyms were not allowed to be spoken at the Commission. And so the women had to re-fashion how to tell their stories to provoke an aesthetic awakening. And they did.

As we think about narrative responsibility I want to press a bit on the responsibility to historicise and situate but also to radiate; to consider and theorise what our narrative

projects tell us and others about the human condition, always in very specific places, but also migrating wildly across the globe. In these times of massive injustice, when people around the world huddle together in the face of aggressive global capitalism, inequality gaps, war, terror and calls for White nationalism, perhaps our narrative projects can contribute a small bit to disrupt the dominant lies being told; to educate all of us about lives rooted in the stubborn particulars of place and also to widen the geographic and political imagination for how our struggles may be linked to create a very different tomorrow.

We close with the words of Zameka Nungu, one of the widows of Marikana, speaking of the responsibility of the Commission and the mine owners, to incite responsibility among those of us who hear the cries, who dare to translate:

*“I ask you people to be strong, my brothers and sisters be strong and don’t turn back. If you want something (remain) steadfast ... because our husbands died for the truth. People don’t want to hear the truth. Be strong, stand together and do not forget us who stand on that mountain looking you, they’re looking at you, we appeal to you as well as the Union, AMCU. We trust that Union, we appeal to you to be strong and go forward and to my fellow widows, ladies let us pray. Let us have hope.”*

Cynthia Kros tells us the women spoke because “things were burning inside for a long time”. Things are now burning inside, and out. The narrative relational obligation asks, now that we know, what will we do?

Perhaps, tomorrow, we will conjure a critical transnational / translational Participatory Action Research project linking our struggles and wilful subjectivities; our desires and our refusals to silence or assimilate; our theoretical projects and on the ground organizing; documenting structural violence and generating radical possibilities. Until then, I thank the writers, the participants and Hugo Canham for inviting me into this intimate conversation about how we narrate what is, and provoke what could be.

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