



Narratives of Closeness  
and Distance from  
Central-Eastern Europe  
and South-Eastern Africa  
**a Multicontextual Patchwork**





## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

This publication is a project of many people. We would like to express our gratitude to the colleagues from the Women's History Museum in Zambia, Nafasi Art Space in Tanzania, Pro Progressione in Hungary, International Theatre Institute in Germany and Institute of Transmedia Design in Slovenia as well as the entire Deconfining consortium for their diverse support.

Our sincere thanks also go to all authors of the particular pieces collected in the present anthology. Each text included in our book is unique, offering not only new areas for reflection but also revealing fragments and scraps of the authors' lives and their connections with art in different spaces and places.

Our thanks also go to all the people and institutions that financially supported this extraordinary project, including the European Union Creative Europe program, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland and the members of the Bosch Alumni Network.

## TABLE OF CONTENT

Urszula Markowska-Manista and Natasha Omokhodion-Kalulu Banda <i>Introduction</i>	7
<i>About the Deconfining project</i>	13
Karolina Bieniek & Kamil Kawalec <i>Bizzare tropes</i>	15
Shilika Chisoko <i>Undoing the Knots of Place and Space</i>	25
Chiteu Kasongo <i>Threads of Unity</i>	39
Karolina Marcinkowska <i>Towards a Body-Conscious Knowledge</i>	67
Mwaka Siluonde <i>Spiritually Yoked</i>	93
Nyimbili Suzyika <i>The place of theatre as a medium of memory</i>	III
Klara Wojtkowska <i>How I Learned to Pray</i>	125
Karolina Bieniek, Urszula Markowska-Manista, Paulina Brelińska-Garsztka <i>Art as an Encounter</i>	153
<i>Biographies</i>	172

# Narratives of Closeness and Distance from Central-Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Africa

**a Multicontextual Patchwork**

**EDITED BY** Urszula Markowska-Manista &  
Natasha Omokhodion-Kalulu Banda



**Creation is  
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# Introduction

By bringing together artists, scholars and practitioners from diverse contexts and countries (Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Czechia, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zambia) who search for common points and connections in intercontinental history, memories, art, science and fine literature, we were searching for innovative ways of looking at that which is near and far, while exploring the world of Central and Eastern Europe (i.e. Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and South-Eastern Africa (i.e. Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia).

To join us on this intercontinental journey, we have invited artists who are familiar with borderline categories in thinking, acting and artistic expression. These categories include: proximity and distance – spaces and places as well as regarding time – the past, present and future within and between South-East Africa and Central and Eastern Europe. An orientation towards the multiplicity and diversity of categories helps – through art – to understand the world and its borderlands. It helps us to discover that which has not yet been discovered, the tacit, indigenous, regional knowledge as a bridge to mutual understanding. At the same time, it makes it possible to decode people's experiences, to show the potential and meaning of things, to expose new meanings and dimensions of rituals here and there and the "in between". Creation is therefore knowledge at the intersection of art and science, which we understand as a step towards reading that which is common, in both old and new meanings.

In the 21st century, it is not easy to bend space-time metaphorically speaking and make the message of a literary work into an artistic message comprehensible to diverse audiences, exposing the value of diverse contexts. Art and literature are governed by their own rules. This is why we invited authors who feel close to these contexts and who express themselves in and through various and new platforms, and forms of presentation.

Since the dawn of time, the task of art has been to externalise human emotions, longings, aspirations, goals, plans, dilemmas, dreams and thoughts in nature and culture. Art (de)

constructs and decolonises ways of looking, thinking and acting. Becoming an engine of change and transformation, it supports the participation and social activism of individuals and groups.

All of us – the authors as well as us as editors – have poured what constitutes our social world onto these pages. Through the lens of our chosen form of expression, we have portrayed what it (this world) means to us in the process of reflecting how we think, and why we think that way, along with perceptions and ideas and prejudices and assumptions.

This is how this publication came about. Based on shared assumptions and the individual choices of theme, content and form of expression of each author, it has revealed how we think, feel and create collectively as local creators – citizens of the global world.

This anthology hopes to develop a more comprehensive understanding and theorisation of the connections and distances in experiencing, thinking and telling about closer and more distant worlds whose places and spaces reveal their artistic, scientific, and literary potential. We are looking for unique narratives that de-orient, decolonise and bring knowledge and practice closer.

We invited the following submissions: personal essays, counter-stories (fiction and non-fiction), memories (part of the diary), academic articles, and re-told fables and tales.

The publication consists of eight texts. Each one is in itself a piece of the book's jigsaw puzzle. Each text is the voice of an author, who, participating in a unique form of expression, has woven a unique message that is in keeping with the tenets of deconfining arts.

The texts, which vary in form and expressive intensity, were written by authors coming from different backgrounds and representing differing fields of arts and sciences. The authors are diverse in terms of their artistic interests and experiences, age, passions, place of origin and the place(s) they linked their texts to.

We hope that this anthology will be useful to readers from all corners of the world as a polyphony of narratives that allow us to interpret and reinterpret the connections and codes of meaning between Central and Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Africa.



For us editors – working on the jigsaw pieces of this anthology has become a valuable source of knowledge about the unknown and inspiration for further work in which we will combine two muses: art and science.

## **Introduction to the structure and chapters of the anthology**

The edited volume consists of a complementary section of chapters contributed by authors from different contexts, belonging to different worlds of art, culture and science, and are diverse in terms of interests, age, achievements and experiences.

The texts focus on issues surrounding the authors' narratives based on their individual experiences and insights. It is important to emphasise the richness of the forms of expression and the multiplicity of fields of exploration that constitute areas of individual interest, as well as the more and less distant themes that are part of the premise of this anthology. The authors have created their own unique categories and styles of exploration, through which they look at the near and the far, examine the diverse realities of Central and Eastern Europe and South-East Africa, and enter into this intercontinental context with the language of art or the language of science. The texts reveal the dynamism and uniqueness of the issues, phenomena and situations described, as well as the unpredictability of events and the value of sharing perspectives.

In the first text: *Bizarre tropes*, Kamil Kawalec hosts a conversation with Karolina Bieniek, director of the Art Transparent Foundation, about international co-operation in the field of contemporary art between institutions of the European Union and Africa based on Karolina's experiences gained during her trips to numerous African countries. They discuss difficulties related to stereotypes, changing paradigms and evolving cultural backgrounds which Karolina has witnessed over twenty years of her research. They also refer to the diaries of Anna Szpakowska-Kujawska and the texts of Ewa Szumańska, thus reinterpreting the role of a woman as a traveller and artist, from

time to time recalling stories about African countries from a female perspective.

Later, Shilika Chisoko in her text *Undoing the Knots of Place and Space* ushers contemporary Zambian fiction into academia framed by mid-century post-colonial European theory for discourse. Her approach demonstrates the theme of closeness and distance as reflected in her apt title. Her unique choice of references for the text's framework make the analysis surprising, compelling and innovative. Slovenian Slavoj Žižek, Maria Pia Lara studied in Berlin when she came up with the concept of public spheres as social imaginaries, and together with Ranka Primorac, whose work focuses on Southern Africa, are brought up close against female-centred fiction from the likes of Mubanga Kalimamukwento. Her work reminds us that post-colonial contexts demonstrate repetitive patterns regardless of geographical location.

In the next part of the anthology, Chiteu Kasongo weaves a poetic exploration of closeness and distance entitled *Threads of Unity*. The author describes his poetic expression as developing a deeper understanding of the connections and gaps that shape experiences, thoughts and narratives in the realm of closeness and distance. Each piece of this poetic work allows for discovery and interpretation in the realm of narrative as well as imagination and immersion in the poetic inter alia of knowledge and practice.

In her text *Towards a Body-Conscious Knowledge*, Karolina Marcinkowska addresses several issues related to the challenges of conducting research as a female researcher in a foreign socio-cultural reality. Her analyses at the intersection of knowledge and experience from different parts of Africa and Europe provide a starting point for considering topics such as personal experience, research and the impact of context on the female researcher. The article also makes reference to the concept of herstory as a theoretical basis for her narrative reflection.

Educational and entertaining, Mwaka Siluonde's *Spiritually Yoked* in the text brings period fiction to life through closeness to character and focused narrative. We follow the story of Sister Mulenga, a nun on a journey who takes us through her deepest memories during the 1970's against the backdrop of a historical event at the Roan mine accident of Zambia. With unflinching

courage, Siluonde skilfully explores themes of domestic abuse, rural to urban migration, race and class.

In his chapter: *The place of theatre as a medium of memory*, Nyimbili Suzyika draws on Stuart Spencer's 2 spectrum on storytelling to explain the impact of theatre on audiences, while justifying the uniqueness of theatre in evoking and questioning memory. The author also identifies theatre as an important tool for interpreting and exploring memories. Based on an analysis of two plays from Hungary and Zambia, the author shares his experience and understanding of proximity through the lens of theatre.

Fiction and memoir are combined in the work of Klara Wojtkowska's *How I Learned to Pray* which is both visceral and vulnerable. Universal and intimate at once, Wojtkowska's work is a stunning patchwork of memory, which allows it to flow like a song. She explores complex contemporary themes such as the immigrant, spirituality and belonging with warmth and depth. Intricate. Affecting, far-reaching: Wojtkowska takes us on a journey with her stark reflexivity and sharpness of observation.

The final text is a female multi-voice entitled: *Art as an Encounter – narrative paths of closure and opening to new*. The form chosen for expression is not accidental, as the multiplicity of narratives allows for a multifaceted view and grasp of the pulsating categories in the theme of art and knowledge and their importance for human development and social justice in an intercontinental dimension. It concludes the volume by identifying the value of scholarly and artistic endeavours and the crucial role of women's agency in the processes of production and reproduction of socially useful knowledge.

Editors, Poland & Zambia,  
December 2023



## About the Deconfining project

The DECONFINING project aims to create improved and fairer cultural ties between Europe and Africa by developing a sustainable reference model of co-operation that will later be extended to other regions of the world. Building on the close collaboration between the two continents and the integration of their Capitals of Culture programmes, this project will bring together cultural practitioners, policymakers, performing, media/visual artists, in-field universities and audiences from both continents to explore and demonstrate new ways of intercontinental artistic and cultural (policy) co-operation, as well as to contribute to a better understanding of confinement patterns from different points of view in an intercontinental perspective. All this happens in order to break free from paternalistic and colonial views in favor of a strong participatory attitude, and to provide better access and information for intercontinental mobility and transnational co-creation.

The project is designed and led by twelve partners from eleven European and one African country, and will feature four forums, four micro-conferences, a mobility platform, an interactive policy toolkit, a DECONFINING anthology ebook; and newly created artworks, including performances, installations, twenty podcast episodes presenting (tandem) artistic practices, twelve art tours, and a rich open digital archive.

The DECONFINING partnership is composed of cultural producers, research institutions, cultural governmental bodies/institutions and a private non-governmental institution, bringing together and complementing expertise addressed throughout the project. Project partners and Intercontinental Co-operation Organisations from Europe and Africa engage together for this common endeavor.

As part of the Work Package No. 4 of the DECONFINING project, Art Transparent (Poland) and Pro Progressione (Hungary) co-operate with organisations from Tanzania and Zambia. Our goal is to test new relations and produce artistic activities, of which this publication is an element.

**How our Central  
European ways  
of looking at  
East Africa  
differ from the  
Western ways  
which dominate  
media coverage**

# Bizarre tropes

*A conversation with Karolina Bieniek,  
Director of the Art Transparent Foundation*

**1. What is your experience of artistic collaboration with Tanzania?**

When the opportunity arose in my professional life to work internationally with a partner organisation on the African continent, my thoughts immediately turned to Tanzania. I have a special relationship with this country. Since 2005, I've been involved in various private and professional activities there. The possibility of long-term collaboration and cultural and artistic exchange offered by the four-year *Deconfining* project inspired me to look for a partner organisation capable of meeting the challenges of this large and complex undertaking. Many years of professional experience outside Europe as well as on other continent have taught me that in such situations, it's best to rely on referrals and recommendations from well-wishers and face-to-face meetings. Incidentally, I'd previously worked in the African Great Lakes region, doing research while also implementing aid activities. Therefore regarding *Deconfining* I relied on people who know the atmosphere of Dar es Salaam much better than I do – former residents of Tanzania's second capital. Thanks to Helena Goldon, I learned about the Nafasi Art Space – a wonderful NGO whose profile is very similar to Art Transparent's. Together with Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey and Lilian Hipolyte, we had several online meetings and discussed scenarios for possible collaborations. At the beginning, it was not at all clear that the work would bind us for years.

The organisation of the co-operation with Zambia was very similar. I knew that Karolina Łągiewka lived and worked there – we'd already collaborated in the implementation of

support activities connected with the UNESCO World Book Capital Conakry 2017. It was Karolina who introduced me to Samba Yonga and Natasha Omokhodion of the Women's History Museum in Lusaka, with whom we're currently working on a book as part of this project.

**2. What is your view on how this collaboration is unfolding? How much have you managed to achieve and how much still needs to be worked out?**

We started working on the *Deconfining* project with a very large group of NGOs from both continents. It was in June 2019 when, as part of the preparatory programme for the European Capital of Culture Rijeka 2020, Sylvia Amann invited us to a conference on European-African networking ideas. Since we as Art Transparent had already carried out activities in this area, for example as part of the aforementioned UNESCO World Book Capital Conakry 2017, we had plenty of reasons to share our experience. The next step was to prepare an application in response to a call for large-scale projects and collaborations within the Creative Europe programme, which took our consortium more than six months. In the end, we submitted this extremely complex application in 2021, and were fortunate enough to be able to start implementing the project in June 2022. It's a very long process, but it was only after all the agreements had been signed and the very complicated organisational phase was over that we were able to move on to the most interesting part of the activity, which was and is the implementation of the objectives of this collaboration.

We are now (at the time of this interview) in the first year of a four-year collaboration (2022–2026). As project partners, we've held two open calls: one for texts to be published together with the Women's History Museum Zambia, and another for residencies in Poland and Tanzania. The results are fascinating. We are working with many very interesting people. I feel we're bridging the gaps, connecting the dots between our regions of the world, however we're still at the beginning of the journey.



**3. One of the sources of inspiration for your research is the book *Bizary* by Ewa Szumańska. To what extent have African countries' relations with Europe changed from what Szumańska describes?**

I became “infected” by Ewa Szumańska’s literary works when I was carrying out a series of activities revolving around Professor Leon Podsiadły of the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, who’d spent five years working as a teacher in Conakry, Guinea. The professor was always close to our initiatives and, as a member of the Wrocław Group, often visited the Mieszkanie Gepperta gallery run by Art Transparent. During exhibition openings and many meetings in his home and studio, he told us extraordinary stories about people connected with Wrocław who’d dedicated part of their lives and work to different regions of Africa. My favourite stories, however, were those connected with his experience of leaving the reality of communist Poland for Guinea-Conakry, which was about to regain its independence; his work at a local school of arts and crafts, his relationship with Guinean students and, finally, his Polish-Guinean search for the capital of the Mali Empire.

In 2017, I came across a great book published by the Wrocław-based publishing house Warstwy – Ewa Szumańska’s *Bizary*. I knew the story of the legendary “Studio 202” radio show and Szumańska’s years-long series “From the Diary of a Young Doctor,” in spite of that I was completely unaware that she was first and foremost a passionate traveller. I was fascinated by her way of looking at the world, her insightfulness and empathetic view of Africa, which was similar to Podsiadły’s.

Reflecting on these two subjective accounts led to a question about how two distant regions of the world, Central Europe and East Africa, look at and perceive each other. This question is echoed in the title of a publication that is part of the Deconfining project: *Narratives of Closeness and Distance From Central-Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Africa – A Multicontextual Patchwork*, which is being prepared under the editorship of Dr Urszula Markowska-Manista and Natasha Omokhodion.

#### **4. Do you recall any of the stories Professor Podsiadły told you?**

Yes, he talked a lot about the mid-1960s. His stories were full of characters from Wrocław, such as the actors Zbyszek Cybulski and Feliks Podsiadły, Leon's brother. We wrote about them in the catalogue published by Art Transparent after the *Bel Air* exhibition at the Mieszkanie Gepperta gallery [*Bel Air, Leon Podsiadły*, 2020, Wrocław]. I was particularly impressed by the story of the making of Stanisław Lenartowicz's film *Full Ahead*. The director, in collaboration with Ewa Szumańska, shot the film during a voyage on a Polish ship from Szczecin, with stops in the Canary Islands, Dakar and the islands around Conakry, among others. Podsiadły spoke of the bravado of the legendary Zbigniew Cybulski in Conakry and the elegance of Teresa Tuszyńska. Let's not forget that this was at a time when making films in such remote places was not a matter of course! Another story concerned the co-operation of Polish scientists from Szczecin, Professors Władysław Filipowiak and Bogusław Szerniewicz, with Professor Djibril Tamsir Niane in the organisation of archaeological expeditions in search of the capital of the Mali Empire (1962, 1964–65, 1967–68, 1973–74, 1978). During these expeditions, the painting skills of Leon's brother Feliks were particularly appreciated by the researchers. The artists were responsible for documenting the artefacts found during the excavations. By the way, Leon and his brother Feliks sometimes travelled to the interior of the country with Polish and Guinean scientists, for example in order to prepare an exhibition in Conakry dedicated to Guinean cultures. There are many such stories. To this day, people living in these places fondly remember the Polish and Central European teachers, lecturers, town planners and engineers who, in the second half of the 20th century, carried out educational and commercial projects in many parts of Africa.

#### **5. What do you think is our contemporary perspective on African-European relations? Do we still have the same stereotypes about Africa or have they changed?**

I think that our perceptions of each other are still based on stereotypes, which fortunately are beginning to be challenged. However, I would like to stress that stereotyping is

present not only in the Central European perspective on Africa – it works both ways. Anyway, if you want to focus on stereotypes, you have to know that they are completely natural for any human being who has to function in one way or another in a very complex world. Nonetheless, I want to believe that the processes of globalisation are giving us a chance for a major breakthrough, and that technology is creating unprecedented opportunities for getting to know each other, co-operating directly, and thus challenging stereotypes. This is what projects like *Deconfining* are about. Books, meetings, video works, performances and ultimately podcasts or interviews – they give audiences the chance to take a broad view of geographically distant regions from multiple perspectives.

## **6. Anna Szpakowska-Kujawska also kept a diary during her travels to Africa. What can we learn from her notes?**

When we opened the *Bel Air* exhibition in our Mieszkanie Gepperta gallery in 2017, I was approached by Mrs. Anna Szpakowska-Kujawska, a wonderful artist from Wrocław, also a member of the Wrocław Group, who said that, like Podsiadły, she'd spent almost seven years of her life in West Africa. She told me about the book she wrote and self-published after that stay entitled *Ekundayo czyli droga* [Ekundayo or The Road], but she never mentioned her travel diaries. It was not until 2023, when her own exhibition was being organised at Mieszkanie Gepperta, that she admitted that she still had her unpublished diaries of her stay in Nigeria and her travels to neighbouring countries. When Anna visited the Foundation's office one day, we received a copy of these very interesting texts, full of descriptions of an Africa that no longer exists, having completely changed over the last fifty years. What I found particularly appealing in Szpakowska-Kujawska's account was her sensitivity to the people, especially the women she met in Nigeria, as well as to Nigerian culture and art. In the second volume of the diaries, I also came across the story of her trip to Tanzania, her fascination with the country and her incredible expedition to the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro.

I thought about all the cultural tropes known from popular literature and cinema – from Karen Blixen's *A Farewell to Africa* to Corinne Hofmann's *The White Masai* – that are common to us in

Europe, including Eastern Europe. I began to wonder about this fascination with East Africa within European culture and its reception on the other side of the equator. This provoked the question of how our Central European ways of looking at East Africa differ from the Western ways, which dominate media coverage.

**7. Szumańska's or Szpakowska-Kujawska's accounts seem to be directly connected with your travel experiences. What do you think is worth highlighting here?**

Above all, what strikes me is that all three of us are travellers from Wrocław, from the heart of Central Europe, who go to seemingly unusual places and like to talk about them. I like to think that our stories are about the world as we encounter it, as opposed to the currently popular trend of talking about ourselves when travelling. I have a great appreciation for the stories of women travellers, as they tend to demonstrate a very different sensibility to the stories of men-conquerors. Finally, I'm fascinated by the biographies of Szumańska and Szpakowska-Kujawska – women who, at a time when having a passport and the means to travel far were not a given, were able to carry out such logistically difficult projects. It is also interesting to note that, despite our love of far-flung travels, all of us linked our professional lives to culture and the arts.

The image of Szpakowska-Kujawska's visit to the village project of the Austrian-Nigerian artist Susanne Wenger never leaves my mind. Thanks to Wenger's work, an area of great importance to Yoruba culture was saved. Her social and artistic involvement led to the protection of seventy-five hectares of sacred groves and small shrines dedicated to local deities. Her project became her life. Before that, I had no idea that someone from my immediate environment witnessed this amazing work of art in the Yoruba village.

Another thing that is important to me is my fascination with how the women look at the world. Nobody describes the women they encounter like these two authors. The stories of how they lived and loved, stories about ambition, meaning and passing, have made a huge impression on me. To add to that, our partner in this project is the Women's History Museum in

Lusaka. We still know too little about both African countries and Polish and African herstories. I hope we can change that.

**8. You talk about many interesting stories connecting our part of Europe with different African countries. When preparing the Deconfining project, did you also think about any differences or tensions that could arise during its implementation?**

I think we're just beginning to find that out. This project has been created to get to know each other in action. Anyone reading our application, which won funding from the Creative Europe programme, will have noticed that the verb "test" is repeated a lot. That's no coincidence. First of all, it's important to realise that the fact that we don't know how to deal with potential differences is due to insufficient knowledge about each other. In official documents, these differences are always presented in terms of crisis or conflict, never in terms of diversity and co-operation. Hence the idea of approaching the issue of co-operation in an alternative way, which poses many difficulties. Unfortunately, inequalities arise even at the point of applying for funds, when it turns out that out of fifty-seven African countries, only two are eligible to participate. As a consequence, we spent a lot of time trying to come up with a project model that would meet the funder's criteria.

**9. As part of the Deconfining project, the Art Transparent Foundation in co-operation with the Nafasi Art Space have selected a group of six artists from Europe and Africa whom we will meet during the 22nd edition of the SURVIVAL Art Review in Wrocław. What themes can we expect to find in their video works? Are their works about identity, politics, ecology? How are these notions presented?**

As we speak, this part of the project is still to come. We know the names of the artists selected through an open call for residencies in Poland and Tanzania. This book will be their guide. These six artists from East Africa and Central Europe will produce new, original video works exploring the links between

the former communist bloc countries and the African governments of the time, which are not obvious from today's perspective. Traces of these links can be found, for example, in the architectural monuments that still exist today, such as in Tanzania. Some of the artists will look for differences and similarities in the field of culture – for example, in handicrafts or dance in both regions of the world. Others will focus on social issues, such as women's rights or health and hygiene.

Why did we choose the medium of video art? The reason is that one of the limitations of circulating works of art worldwide is their high cost. Knowing that the international transport of art objects is an extremely complicated process, we decided with the curators that for the good of the project that we would narrow down the medium. We hope that the resulting video works will allow us to look at each other and get to know each other better, but above all – that they will be easily accessible to the general public.

**10. It seems to me that the notion of the “other” with reference to African countries has been exhausted. Can we replace it with a reflection on how to build the “common”?**

It's interesting that art from East Africa is not present in Poland, while at the same time art from Central and Eastern Europe is unknown and invisible in Africa. We don't know much about each other, although, as you can see, we have long-standing relations. I can name just a handful of people, significant initiatives or projects intended to change this state of affairs – and we live in a large European country. Therefore the aim of a project like *Deconfining* is to explore these two perspectives. Like our partners from other European cities (e.g. Bad Ischl [AT], Bodo [N], Budapest [HU], Kaunas [LT] or Rijeka [HR]), we are working with our Tanzanian and Zambian partners to deconstruct myths and build stable relationships between our cultural institutions. We want to get to know the current African discourse, so we organise individual study visits and online meetings to find out what issues contemporary Kenyan, Tanzanian and Rwandan art is addressing. From there we try to address the question of proximity and distance.

When I first flew to East Africa in 2005, not many had heard of Poland, and if anyone associated us with anything, it was with the fall of communism and Lech Wałęsa. That image has changed over the years. Today, on the beaches of Zanzibar, Polish is as common as English or German. However, what do we know about each other? Children in Polish schools hear more about Staś and Nel [fictional children characters from H. Sienkiewicz's novel *In Desert and Wilderness*] and *Afryka Kazika* [book by Ł. Wierzbicki] – literary portrayals of the African continent from a century or more ago – than about the real problems of today's youngest continent, where more than half of the one billion inhabitants are under eighteen. It's a continent that is the most vulnerable to the costs of climate change, and yet it's proving to be quite stable and predictable, contrary to existing stereotypes. We want to come up with an unbiased storytelling that can bring us together – here in Central Europe and there in East Africa.

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**There is  
no hope of  
rescue, and the  
consequences of  
falling into the  
sea are grave**



SHILIKA CHISOKO

# Undoing the Knots of Place and Space

*An exploration of the possibilities rendered  
by depictions of violence in selected  
contemporary in Zambian short fiction.*

Historically, Zambia has had a dearth in both literary production and literary criticism. Literary scholar Ranka Primorac has attributed this phenomenon to what she terms “a literariness of crisis”, suggesting that from the country’s inception, “Zambia’s written literary cultures have evolved in various conditions of crisis” (498). This led to Zambia developing a literary tradition that deviated from most of the African canon. Additionally, Leonard Chirwa posits that the Zambian “book publishing industry is also adversely affected by exorbitant printing costs which inevitably means that the books produced are too highly priced for the average Zambian” (3). Despite these setbacks, there has been an increase in the production of fiction in recent years and I link this to the ease in publishing that digital media affords Zambian writers.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this, there has also been an increase in the participation of women writers and a tendency to portray the lives of women in a specific manner. With the above-mentioned considerations in mind, the following article

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1 Adenekan and Cousins have written comprehensively about the possibilities that the online writing space affords contemporary writers in Adenekan, Shola, and Helen Cousins. *African short stories and the online writing space. The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013. 19 Adenekan, Shola, and Helen Cousins. *African short stories and the online writing space. The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013. 199-213.9-213.

concerns a common characteristic amongst a necessarily curated selection of contemporary female-authored Zambian short stories: “violent interruptions” that threaten the lives of the women represented in said fiction. The stories are *A Hand to Hold* (2018) by Mali Kambandu, *All to Love* (2019) by Lydia Ngoma and *Thandiwe* (2022) by Mubanga Kalimamukwento. To support this observation, I borrow from Mbembe and Roitman’s assertion that the inhabitants of the post-colony develop “regimes of subjectivity” to grapple with the effects of living in constant fear of sudden violence. Materialising from this finding will be the argument that these violent outbursts denote a society distinctively marked by violence at its core. I argue that this foundational violence is structural, using the work of scholars such as Slavoj Žižek and others who aptly hypothesise the tenacity of said violence. Aside from unearthing a new terrain for contemporary authors, digital media provides new possibilities for contemporary literary critics such as myself. I can metaphorically reach into academic repositories from across the globe and access an array of scholarship. That the work of Žižek and Primorac, two Eastern European scholars form the basis through which I carry out my analysis, speaks to the capabilities of digital media. Furthermore, I find it intriguing that my work marries theories from Africa and Eastern Europe, two regions that have long been obscure due to legacies of violence and subjugation. In this way, I view digital media as possessing a “deconfining” capacity – allowing individuals to untie the conceptual knots of place and space. This promotes cross-cultural exchange, the presentation of previously obscure narratives and the establishment of one’s place in the world.

Additionally, in this article I draw attention to *what* constitutes a violent interruption in the selected short fiction. I will compare *The heart of a woman*<sup>2</sup> and the selected short stories in order to highlight a progression in thematic concerns within Zambian short stories authored by women. Thereon I will contend that this shift (with attention to the occurrences described as violent) can be accredited to the mode through which the selected short fiction is disseminated – digital media platforms. This article will also explore the affordances of

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2 The reference is quoted as written by the authors.

the short story form and platform through which the stories are published. Finally, I will explore the successive influence of the representations of women in the selected fiction in possibly swaying public perceptions about an array of societal issues. Taking my cue from Maria Pia Lara's work on feminist narratives in the public sphere, I will argue that by simply presenting women's issues as fiction, these contemporary stories demand recognition for these issues and have the capacity to act as "illocutionary forces." Finally, I contend that the short stories are not merely counternarratives but serve as vehicles to portray the "slippery" nature of navigating Zambian life as a woman.

As I gathered the resources that would constitute the theoretical framework of this article, I made the unwitting decision to make use of the work of Žižek and Primorac. The former because of a recommendation that was made to me, and the latter because her work is the most accessible critical commentary on Zambian literature. Reflecting on the theme of this volume, I view my unintentional inclusion of Žižek and Primorac as indicative of the ways in which cross-cultural exchange is occurring between Southern Africa and Eastern Europe. Although I cannot claim that this exchange is widespread, the organic nature in which I encountered these scholars and the way their scholarship comfortably 'fits' my argument points towards more similarities than differences between Southern African and Eastern Europe. Thus, I begin my analysis with the view that it also serves as an exploration of how texts from Southern Africa and Eastern Europe can be read alongside one another.

The utterance of the word 'violence' conjures up the imagery of physical assault by one or several individuals onto another (or others). Judith Butler observes that "the figure of the blow has tacitly organised some of the major debates on violence, suggesting that violence is something that happens between two parties in a heated encounter" (2). Notwithstanding, Butler acknowledges the restrictive nature of this categorisation, citing how violence ubiquitously undergirds the structure of contemporary society. She argues that "without disputing the violence of the physical blow, we can nevertheless insist that social structures or systems, including systemic racism, are violent" (2). In a similar vein, Slavoj Žižek warns against the temptation to define violence as being wholly objective. He

stresses that it is imperative “to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and promote tolerance” (1). Žižek’s use of the word “outbursts” is of particular importance, as it signals the existence of a pre-existing framework of violence that renders these outbursts possible.

“Violent interruptions” is a term used by Ranka Primorac to describe the varying iterations of a host of arduous “issues related to post-colonial modernity (such as HIV/AIDS, homophobia, mental illness and witchcraft)” rendered in a collection of Zambian short fictions titled *The heart of a woman*<sup>3</sup>, and their capacity to instigate instances of chaos in the characters’ daily lives (22). They occur at various points throughout the selected short fiction. For example, “I can call her whatever the fuck I want,” says an incensed Misozi in response to her sister scrutinising her (Kalimamukwento 9). This rude reaction is not merely a result of Misozi’s annoyance at travelling from America to Zambia to care for her sickly mother. Rather, it points towards Misozi’s deep-seated resentment of her mother and the complexity of their relationship. *Thandiwe* by Mubanga Kalimamukwento is a story that details the return to Zambia from the diaspora by a woman called Misozi to care for her ailing mother. The narrative has various thematic concerns, ranging from transnational subjectivity to “black tax”. However, of cardinal interest to this article is the bearing through which these instances occur. At the behest of her sister, Misozi is forced to return home. This return is two-fold: physical, in the sense that she must leave her home in the diaspora for Zambia, and mental, in that she is compelled to revisit the trauma she experienced during her childhood. To her displeasure, Misozi must put her life in the USA on hold because of her ailing mother, forcing her to deal with her dilemma immediately.

In a form akin to that of Misozi, Kunda is reminded of the tumultuous nature of her relationship with her mother in *A Hand to Hold*. The focal points of Mali Kambandu’s 2018 tale are a meeting concerning Kunda’s wedding preparations and the preceding and ensuing events. Here, the structure of the

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3 Quoted as written by the authors.

story lends itself to amplifying the instances that ‘interrupt’ Kunda’s state of being. The narrative begins with a distinctively detailed description of a scene in Lusaka’s Ngombe compound, which narrows down to a mysterious frail and seemingly ailing figure resting in a bed. Just as the woman’s figure begins to take shape, she is quickly abandoned, and the narrative shifts to Kunda driving through a compound. Again the scene shifts, and Kunda is transported to her mother’s living room. Surrounded by various women, Kunda “looks around the table and can barely remember a happy moment with these women who are helping her mother plan the happiest moments in her life” (Kambandu 5). Later revelations in the story unveil that Kunda has a distant relationship with her mother and is instead closer to her former house help, Reeda Mwale. From Kunda’s interactions with both parties, it is evident that she is uncomfortable around the former and prefers the latter’s company. However, Maggie tells Kunda that she should not associate with the woman that brings her comfort due to a lack of familial bond. This comprehension forces Kunda to confront the negative feelings festering inside her and arguably constitutes a violent interruption.

*All to Love* by Lydia Ngoma is presented from the perspective of three characters: the sisters Enala and Judy together with Judy’s daughter, Chola. Their sections offer responses to Enala’s arrival at Judy’s house in Lusaka from a town in Zambia called Chinsali. Enala is visibly unwell, having travelled to Lusaka to seek medical treatment. A discussion between the two sisters reveals that Enala is HIV positive, and other aspects of the story confirm that Enala’s husband, Onesmus, is abusive towards her. However, her husband travels to Lusaka to collect her, threatening her with divorce if she stays away from their home any longer. Onesmus tells Enala, “I’m not forcing you to return... just don’t be surprised when you’re replaced” (Ngoma 12). Enala’s sudden arrival and the domino effects constitute violent interruptions, propelling each character to confront her circumstances.

Primorac observes that *The heart of a woman* constructs the notion of “cityness” associated with a mode of subjectivity that allows characters to circumvent or overcome these, viz, a “disposition” rather than a fixed identity or an impartial

aspect of space. Indeed, the same can be said of the selected short fiction. The characters in these narratives exist in a myriad of locales (rural Zambia, Lusaka, the USA, etc.). Nevertheless, their capacity to overcome their respective hurdles alludes to a state of mind – in lieu of spatio-cultural resolutions. For example, Enala decides to return to her husband and family, saying she “was going to give it all to love” (Ngoma 14). She neglects her need for proper medical care and instead performs her predetermined societal role. In each of the short stories, the characters steel themselves for the challenges that lie ahead. Misozi refuses to engage with the possibilities arising from the information she extracts from a shaky conversation with her mother, as illustrated when she says, “me? I say, fuck empathy; I lift my purse and walk out into the waiting sunlight” (Kalimamukwento 24). Emerging from the adaptive quality exhibited by the characters is the allusion towards a society wrought with violence, which constantly threatens the upheaval of the character’s state of being.

In her analysis of *The heart of a woman*, Primorac links the compounded disposition adopted by the characters in the various fictions to Mbembe and Roitman’s conceptualisation of “regimes of subjectivity” – that is, the ensemble of experiences and mentality shared by individuals residing in the post-colony. Quoting Mbembe and Roitman, Primorac observes that “regimes of subjectivity and self-making imposed on those who are required to interweave their existence with the conditions of instability, uncertainty and discontinuity which recur in many post-colonial contexts” (25). She further notes that the ever-looming threat of instantaneous interruptions of the individual’s everyday life within the post-colony lends itself to the production of fragmented identities, with these identities affording people the capacity to develop an inventory of improvisations to cope with the threat of sudden changes. While I find that Mbembe and Roitman’s theorisation is of great importance in understanding the persistence of structural violence in the selected short fiction within the Zambian cultural context, I forgo a focus on the post-colony as a concept and instead build upon the idea of the continuation of legacies of violence in Zambian society. I do this in alignment with the critiques of writers such as Helon Habila, who argue for a shift

away from what he terms “post-nationalist” writing in contemporary African literature. The diverse characters in the selected short fiction display characteristics of having developed “regimes of subjectivity”. Misozi and Kunda have strained relationships with their mothers, with the latter parties depicted as cold, distant, and uncaring.

However, the narratives unfold and divulge information that adds nuance to their distant behaviour. Kunda’s mother, Maggie, devotes her time to her work to provide for her child. For Maggie, making money and achieving success was necessary because “it was what she did to keep her child clothed and fed” (Kambandu 10). Similarly, a suggestion is made by Thandiwe whilst she is in frenzied conversation with Misozi, that she may have been sexually assaulted by her father, and further that Misozi may have been conceived as a result. “He will hurt her also,” Thandiwe says, referring to her father, Gabriel (Kalimamukwento 21). While these revelations do not serve to rid Thandiwe and Maggie of fault regarding the trauma their daughters have experienced, the occurrences imply the existence of structures that limit their capacity to traverse society with the privileges that men have. Their shortcomings in their relationships with their daughters seem to hold more profound consequences due to the fact that they are women. This argument is qualified not by what is mentioned but rather by *what is excluded*. Misozi’s father is only briefly mentioned in *Thandiwe*, while Kunda’s father is not mentioned at all in “A Hand to Hold.” However, Misozi and Kunda direct their resentment towards their mothers. From this it is suggested that both narratives operate in a society that holds women to a higher standard than men, a society that does not allow women to make mistakes. I argue that this discrepancy connotes the existence of structural violence.

Žižek’s argument is suggestive of the notion that the structure of society *is* inherently violent. As mentioned above, violent interruptions consistently featured in the selected short stories threaten to destabilise the very being of the women represented. I argue that these violent interruptions should be regarded as acts of violence, albeit in different forms. It is precisely this variety of form, which is yet feasibly similar in their impact on the personhood of the women represented in the short stories, together with the women’s capacity to manoeuvre

the challenges they are facing with a somewhat fixed disposition, that alludes towards the understanding that the system through which they operate is inherently violent. This understanding is overwhelmingly presented by the authors as subconscious, which amplifies the latent nature of violence as a determining feature in the framework of society, whether the authors intended to or not. For instance, Onesmus is physically and mentally abusive towards Enala. She returns to him however when he threatens to replace her. For her, the threat of being unmarried outweighs her need for well-being. The implication of her decision is grave because it suggests a society in which a woman's marital status matters more than her health. Despite being pushed through a window by Onesmus early on in her marriage, when meeting to discuss the situation, their families "had a hushed discussion and at the end of it all, Enala was leaving in Onesmus' pickup truck" (Ngoma 9). This illustrates how various parties act in concert to maintain the position of women in society, with no regard for the health and safety of women.

Beyond conveying the underlying violent nature of the societies in which their characters are placed, there is a difference in the depictions of violence and the methods the characters in *The heart of a woman* and the selected short fiction adopt to evade these predicaments – a contradiction that is arguably connected to the variance in conditions of production between the two collections. While *The heart of a woman* was published in print in 1997 with a panoptic theme of women's empowerment (Primorac 25), the selected short fiction has been published online from 2018 onwards (without a mandated narrative focus like that of the stories *The heart of a woman*). Despite a clear directional focus influencing their production, the female characters in the selected short stories are depicted experiencing various forms of violence. However, where the characters in *The heart of a woman* adopt methods and mannerisms through which they can survive in their violent societies, the women in the selected short fiction hardly find an efficient resolution to their predicaments, and often by the end of the stories, they return to the point from which their troubles began. For Misozi, Kunda and Enala, there is no happy ending, only an acknowledgement of the precarious nature of their positionality and an attempt to adapt to it.



I argue that the ability to portray a lack of favourable resolutions stems from the affordances of digital media. Digital media grants authors the possibility to escape the bureaucracy of print media and circumvent subordination to didactic, journalistic, and various utilitarian discourses that have primarily been characteristics of Zambian literature (Primorac 20). In terms of literary production, Zambia has largely been excluded from developing at a similar pace to the rest of the continent. Whilst many African writers capitalised from the influential *Heinemann African Writers Series*, the few Zambian writers that have been published since independence have been captivated by what Primorac terms a “*literariness of crisis*”. She contends that “a local literary system that has emerged from conditions of economic, social or political instability and threat, in which producers and consumers of literature allow for the possibility that texts may be directed towards instrumentalist as well as aesthetic ends and purposes” (576).

The state control of publishing houses during early post-independence days and their later preference for educational material over fictional titles (for financial reasons) led to a stunted development of Zambian literature. Literature that does not serve a progressive or instructive purpose has largely been deemed unnecessary. It is therefore significant that the selected short stories do not expressly fixate on didactic concerns, a divergence from Zambian literary tradition that is made possible by the autonomy that digital media provides contemporary writers. Commenting on a Zambian literary journal from the early independence days called *New Writing from Zambia*, Primorac writes “while female authors were not absent, and the group did address woman-centered topics (among others) . . . they were the minority, and among them, there was a conspicuous absence of black women” (60). From this, I argue that digital media has facilitated the increased participation of women in the Zambian literary arena. The fact that the increased participation of female authors has led to depictions of violent interruptions, such as the ones in the selected short stories, points to the possible (and perhaps deliberate) obscuring of women’s narratives that did not align with dominant patriarchal interests.

Each of the selected pieces of short fiction has chiefly been published online, with “A Hand to Hold” winning the inaugural

*Kalemba Short Story Prize*, “All to Love” being shortlisted for the same prize in 2019 and *Thandiwe* being shortlisted for the 2022 *Commonwealth Short Story Prize*. While digital media allows the contemporary writer to reach new audiences and abandon spatio-cultural obligations, Stephanie Santana Bosch presupposes that “collapsing cyberspace into a homogenous diasporic space returns us to problematic assumptions of cyberspace as placeless” (190). She observes that this conception fails to encapsulate network formations between people belonging to diverse distinctive communities at national and transnational levels. Network formation is exhibited in the selected short fiction and is evidenced by their rejection of strict spatio-cultural ties whilst simultaneously writing within Zambian cultural contexts. The authors illustrate this by using Zambian languages in texts without offering English translations. Despite reaching audiences outside of Zambia, especially evidenced in the case of *Thandiwe* the stories maintain the topography of Zambian society and write into Zambian cultural contexts. This points towards the creation of new networks of communication.

Paired with the predisposition of short story form towards depicting various forms of dislocation as characters undergo various changes, I argue that the form and platform through which the selected short fiction is circulated can influence public discourse concerning the issues they bring to the fore. To support this claim, I lean into Maria Pia Lara’s assertion that women’s narratives can be emancipatory. She writes that viewing language and reason as communicative and differentiated spheres of validity “leads to an understanding of how, with the subjects of the speech-acts focusing on newly problematic social issues, it is possible to transform them by creating new narratives in the public sphere” (2). While an attempt to definitively quantify the social impact of the selected short fiction would be far-fetched, I contend that exploring this impact is nonetheless essential – because it allows one to glimpse at otherwise obscure narratives within the Zambian cultural context. Pia Lara contends that “the channels by which new forms of solidarities are fuelled rely on the capacity of narratives to disclose previously unseen marginalisation, exclusion and prejudice” (8). Patriarchal inclinations have long characterised Zambian society. Work by Karen Tranberg Hansen supports

this notion, detailing how women in Zambia have consistently been viewed “as mothers and wives whose sexuality was to be controlled within the conjugal unit” (231). Therefore, the importance of the depictions of violence in the selected short fiction cannot be understated. This is because they offer alternative perspectives from which to view the position of women in Zambian society and illuminate the dangers this can entail.

By way of conclusion, I offer a quote from Žižek in which he comments on the French suburban riots of 2005. He writes that “what is more difficult to accept is precisely the riots’ meaninglessness: more than a form of protest, they are what Lacan called a *passage a l’acte* – an impulsive movement into action which can’t be translated into speech and carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration” (76). Extracting from this context, I put forward the view that the violence represented in the selected short is also meaningless. It is not a means to an end but rather a result of a system that continues to propagate the subjugation of women. From my analysis of the stories as resisting the urge to portray the women as victors of struggle or teach some ‘valuable’ lesson, I argue for the progression of Zambian literary criticism away from a focus on categorising Zambian literature as being enveloped by didacticism and nationalist agendas. This is not to say that Zambian literary texts are devoid of these elements. However, I propose that the way digital media offers Zambia women writers new publication possibilities also warrants critical literary attention. The affordances of digital media have given way to the increased participation of women in the Zambian literary scene and via that to the production of narratives, such as that which is portrayed in the selected short fiction. The prospects presented by these shifts are boundless, with the possibility of being “emancipatory” by calling attention to the constant threat of destabilisation that women in Zambia experience because of persisting patriarchal structures, where Primorac contends that *The heart of a woman* depicts the “slippery” nature of Zambian society (conceivably referring to a metaphorical, consistently wet floor), these stories suggest a much more dire situation: the “turbulent” nature of Zambian society. This metaphor imagines a situation where an individual is stuck at sea in the middle of a raging storm. There is no hope of rescue, and the consequences

of falling into the sea are grave. Such is the nature of the violent eruptions that threaten the lives of the women in the selected short stories.

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**Artistic  
symbolism  
is like a map  
that guides  
us through  
the labyrinth  
of human  
experience**

CHITEU KASONGO

# Threads of Unity

*A Poetic Exploration of Closeness and Distance*

## Introduction

The aim of the anthology “Threads of Unity” is not merely to present verses, but to unfurl a deeper comprehension of the connections and gaps that shape our experiences, thoughts, and narratives within the realms of proximity and remoteness. This collection is an open invitation to embrace the artistic, academic, and literary potential of poetic expression. Through disorienting familiar perspectives, decolonising ingrained paradigms, and approximating new realms of knowledge and practice, poets are urged to engage in a poetic discourse that goes beyond the surface. Each stanza, each line, is an opportunity to blur the lines between what is known and what is yet to be discovered. In the realm of both narrative and imagination, we yearn for pieces that disorient, decolonise, and approximate knowledge and practice. It is through these evocative verses that we hope to challenge perspectives, evoke emotions, and provoke contemplation.

As we traverse through the poetic landscapes within these pages, let us be reminded of the power of language to bridge gaps, to ignite empathy, and to unite us across our diverse experiences. Each poem is a thread, each verse a brushstroke, together painting a vivid portrait of the intricate fabric of human existence. I invite you to engage with these poetic creations, to be moved, to reflect, and to be inspired as we delve into the profound beauty of connection and the subtle nuances of distance in our shared world.

In my exploration of interconnectedness, we recognise the strength that lies in our differences. The varied hues of experience and thought that emerge from different corners of the world intertwine here, creating a space where multiplicity is not only acknowledged but celebrated. As you immerse yourself in the evocative verses of “Threads of Unity,” allow the diverse range of themes and emotions to resonate within you. Let each poem serve as a reminder of the vast expanse of the human heart and mind, capable of empathy, understanding, and interconnectedness even in the face of apparent differences. In embracing diversity through poetry, I illuminate the shared experiences that bind us together, reminding us that our stories are connected.

A symbol can evoke emotions and memories that resonate across cultures and generations, forming a thread of commonality that weaves through the diverse narratives presented in this anthology.

Artistic symbolism is like a map that guides us through the labyrinth of human experience. It provides us with a collective language through which we can communicate our thoughts, fears, dreams, and desires. Poets have the power to disentangle complex ideas and weave them into a fabric of understanding that stretches beyond geographical and societal boundaries.

In “Threads of Unity,” I encounter symbols that transcend mere words, reaching deep into the essence of our shared humanity. These symbols, whether drawn from nature, mythology, or the collective subconscious, act as beacons that illuminate the intersections of interconnectedness. They remind us that, beneath the surface, we are more alike than different, and that our stories, though diverse, are interconnected in ways that unite us all.



# Poetry Collection

In twilight's embrace, where dreams unfold,  
A symphony of voices, stories yet untold.  
Across continents, the threads of connection weave,  
As we embark on a journey, ready to believe.

Through ancient streets of Prague, cobblestone paved,  
Visions of history, bygone tales engraved.  
Whispers of empires, their rise and fall,  
Echo through time, inspiring one and all.

In the heart of Africa, where wild spirits roam,  
Serengeti's vast plains, nature's grandiose poem.  
The rhythm of life, the circle of birth,  
A harmonious dance upon Mother Earth.

Borderlands beckon, where boundaries dissolve,  
Exploring spaces where mysteries evolve.  
In-between realms, a liminal domain,  
Where stories unfold, defying the mundane.

With ink as our brush, we paint with words,  
A canvas of emotions, vibrant and blurred.  
From gentle verses that speak of love's embrace,  
To fierce rhymes that challenge the status quo's grace.

Imagination soars, like birds taking flight,  
Unveiling truths hidden beneath the night.  
Through tales of triumph and battles fought,  
We discover the essence of what life has taught.

As we navigate this journey, hand in hand,  
Guided by voices from distant lands,  
The tapestry of humanity finds its place,  
Interwoven threads of resilience and grace.

In this patchwork of narratives, we find,  
A celebration of the human mind.  
For in stories shared, we come to see,  
The beauty of our shared humanity.

So let the poetry continue to unfold,  
As our voices rise, fearless and bold.  
An intercontinental anthology, built to last.  
In the vast expanse where Europe meets Africa,  
Closeness and distance intertwine, a delicate dance.  
I embark on a journey, guided by poetic muse,  
To explore the theme of deconfinement and its chance.

A borderland emerges, bridging worlds together,  
Where South-Eastern Africa and Central-Eastern Europe unite.  
Here, spaces and places hold stories untold,  
Whispering secrets of connection, revealing new light.

In the depths of memories, I find echoes of past,  
Voices of ancestors reverberate, resonating with pride.  
Their tales shape my understanding of shared history,  
An interwoven tapestry, where cultures coincide.

As the present unfolds, new dimensions take shape,  
Rituals transform, transcending boundaries and time.  
A symphony of diversity, melodies blending as one,  
Uniting communities, harmonising the sublime.

In the spaces “here and there” and “in between”,  
I witness the power of dialogue and exchange.  
From Ugandan hills to Polish landscapes,  
Words connect hearts, overcoming any estrange.

Discovering tacit knowledge, indigenous and wise,  
I delve into the wisdom passed down through the years.  
Regional treasures emerge, celebrating diversity,  
A bridge to mutual understanding, erasing all fears.

Art and science converge, an intersection divine,  
Unveiling shared meanings, a cosmic revelation.  
Brush strokes and equations, poetry and discovery,  
Together they forge a path, igniting imagination.  
As I pen these verses, I sense the call of unity,  
The power of narratives to transcend time and space.  
A patchwork of voices, woven into a tapestry,  
Embracing the challenge of creating shared grace.  
In this multicontextual patchwork, stories intertwine,  
A symphony of words weaving a tapestry divine.  
Through the lens of deconfinement, we explore,  
The closeness and distance that forevermore endure.

From Czechia's castles to Zambia's plains,  
Visions of landscapes, each unique and untamed.  
In the borderlands, where cultures converge,  
I find inspiration in the stories they emerge.

I delve into the depths of counter-stories untold,  
Unveiling the complexities that history may hold.  
Fiction and non-fiction intertwine and collide,  
Painting vivid pictures of the human side.

Within the diary's pages, memories reside,  
Moments captured; emotions amplified.  
Academic articles shed light on knowledge profound,  
Unravelling the connections waiting to be found.

Re-told fables and tales pass through generations,  
Carrying wisdom and lessons, timeless foundations.  
They bridge the gaps, bridging the divide,  
Uniting distant worlds with stories worldwide.

In the exploration of spaces and places,  
I discover the potential in forgotten traces.  
From borderlands to in-between spaces,  
A celebration of humanity's shared embraces.

Indigenous knowledge whispers in the wind,  
Guiding us towards understanding, transcending the din.  
In rituals old and new, we find solace and peace,  
A chance to connect, for tensions to cease.

Art and science entwined, hand in hand,  
Creating a symphony of insights that expand.  
Through poetic verses and scientific discourse,  
We uncover the truths that shape our course.

As I reach the culmination of this poetic endeavour,  
I stand in awe of the connections we can sever.  
The power of narratives to bring us closer,  
To bridge the gaps, making our bonds grow stronger.

In this intercontinental anthology, voices unite,  
Nurturing understanding, sparking shared light.  
With each word written and story told,  
We strive to de-orient, to bring knowledge bold.

So let our narratives of closeness and distance,  
Illuminate the beauty of our shared existence.  
In this multi-contextual patchwork we create,  
A testament to the power of art and its fate.  
In the heart of Central Europe, where history abounds,  
Centuries of tales and struggles, echoing profound.  
From Slovakia's enchanting landscapes to Hungary's embrace,  
A dance of cultures, preserving heritage and grace.

And as I journey to South-Eastern Africa's domain,  
Uganda's lush jungles and Tanzania's endless plain,  
I witness the resilience of people so strong,  
Whose vibrant spirits sing an everlasting song.

In the borderlands where boundaries blur,  
Stories of resilience and hope begin to stir.  
Reading people's experiences, I witness their plight,  
And shed light on the struggles they bravely fight.

The potential of places, both old and new,  
Unveils itself as dreams and aspirations ensue.  
Within the tapestry of rituals and rites,  
Lies the profound meaning of sacred nights.

With each verse penned and story retold,  
Indigenous wisdom weaves its magic, bold.  
A bridge to mutual understanding we find,  
Through the embrace of traditions, intertwined.

The intersection of art and science reveals,  
A universe of possibilities, where innovation heals.  
In shared meanings, we uncover the key,  
To a future where knowledge sets us free.

As I continue this poetic exploration,  
Of closeness and distance, a vibrant creation,  
I invite you to join this journey we embark,  
To celebrate the richness of our interconnected arc.

In this anthology's embrace, we stand tall,  
Building bridges, tearing down walls.  
For in the spaces between our distant lands,  
Lies the potential for unity, hand in hand.

So let us continue to de-orient and decolonise,  
Through narratives that challenge, inspire, and mesmerise.  
As this patchwork expands, our voices unite,  
For a future where art, culture, and love ignite.  
In the realms of imagination, our journey takes flight,  
Beyond the boundaries of day and night.  
Exploring the depths of past, present, and future,  
Unearthing hidden treasures, like a fearless explorer.

Through the corridors of time, we wander,  
In search of stories that stir and ponder.  
A tapestry of lives, intertwined in grace,  
Embracing the beauty of this shared space.

From the cobblestone streets of Prague's old town,  
To the sprawling savannah where wildlife abounds,  
Central-Eastern Europe's charm unfolds,  
A symphony of cultures, stories yet untold.

South-Eastern Africa, a land of wonders,  
With vibrant colours and mesmerising splendours.  
Zambia's mighty Zambezi, a majestic force,  
Tanzania's Serengeti, nature's divine course.

In the borderlands where diversity blooms,  
We explore the boundaries and defy assumed norms.  
Revealing new dimensions of rituals, old and new,  
Where heritage and innovation fuse into a breakthrough.

Through the cracks of confinement, freedom's light,  
Illuminates the paths, dispelling the night.  
Tacit knowledge awakens, indigenous and wise,  
Guiding us on a journey where connections arise.

The arts and sciences dance hand in hand,  
As creativity and intellect brilliantly expand.  
In this intersection, a fusion of brilliance,  
Unlocking possibilities with each shared resonance.

So let our words intertwine, like vines that grow,  
Through this patchwork anthology, let our voices show,  
The power of unity, the strength of diversity,  
In narratives that transcend, fostering solidarity.  
In the tapestry of time, we search for connection,  
Exploring closeness and distance with introspection.  
Through the lens of art and the power of verse,  
We delve into realms where understanding traverses.

In the ancient streets of Prague, a city alive,  
Whispers of history, tales that survive.  
The echoes of kings and the footsteps they trod,  
A legacy woven in stone, a testament to God.

On the plains of Africa, where the wild roam free,  
Serengeti's grandeur, a sight to see.  
The heartbeat of nature, a symphony untamed,  
Where the lion's roar and the zebra's stripes are named.

Borderlands emerge, where cultures collide,  
A meeting point where stories coincide.  
In-between spaces, a mingling of souls,  
Where diversity thrives and acceptance unfolds.  
From the dance of rituals in twilight's embrace,  
To the mysteries of folklore that time can't erase,  
Our poetic voices resound with purpose and might,  
As we bridge the gaps and dissolve the night.

With pen in hand, we dare to challenge norms,  
Breaking down barriers and weathering storms.  
Through each line and stanza, we strive to impart,  
A vision of unity and compassion from the heart.

As the pages turn, the words continue to flow,  
In this intercontinental anthology's glow.  
A testament to the human spirit's ascent,  
As we weave together stories, intertwined and bent.  
In the realm of dreams, where imagination reigns,  
Our poetic journey knows no bounds or constraints.  
We delve deeper still into uncharted lands,  
Where the threads of connection are tightly in our hands.

Through the corridors of memory, we walk,  
Unearthing tales of courage, resilience, and talk.  
Whispers of ancestors, their voices profound,  
Their wisdom guiding us, forever unbound.

From the heart of Budapest, a city of tales,  
Where history dances and nostalgia prevails.  
Cobblestone streets lead to hidden delights,  
Where echoes of the past intertwine with the night.

In the heart of Zambia, the rhythm beats strong,  
A symphony of voices, a harmonious song.  
In the warmth of the sun, and the embrace of the earth,  
We celebrate the beauty of culture's rebirth.

On the canvas of time, we paint stories anew,  
With strokes of emotions, vibrant and true.  
Words become colours, each verse a brushstroke,  
Creating a masterpiece, a poets evoke.

Across borders and oceans, we bridge the divide,  
With poetic expressions that cannot be denied.  
For in the shared language of verse and rhyme,  
We find solace, understanding, and a sense of pride.  
So let us continue, exploring uncharted terrain,  
With pens as our compass, and words as our reign.  
As we delve into the depths of human existence,  
And unravel the mysteries with poetic persistence.  
In the borderlands where cultures intertwine,  
A tapestry of narratives starts to unwind.  
We traverse the landscapes of closeness and distance,  
Exploring the essence of human existence.

Through the eyes of the storyteller, we witness the past,  
Revealing the footprints that history has cast.  
From Central-Eastern Europe to South-Eastern Africa,  
The echoes of struggles and triumphs resound in aura.

In the corridors of memory, we find treasures untold,  
Stories of resilience, of courage, bold.  
Through poetry's lens, we bring them to life,  
Unveiling the depths of joy, sorrow, and strife.

We dance with the rhythm of forgotten rituals,  
Embracing the wisdom passed down from ancients' residuals.  
In the sacred spaces where cultures collide,  
A kaleidoscope of perspectives takes us for a ride.



In the margins of borders, we seek common ground,  
Where shared experiences and connections are found.  
The beauty of diversity, the strength of unity,  
We celebrate the richness of our human community.

Through metaphors and symbols, we transcend time,  
Breaking barriers, building bridges sublime.  
For in the world of poetry, there are no confines,  
Only endless possibilities where creativity shines.  
Amidst the vast expanse of celestial skies,  
Where constellations tell tales of ancestral ties.  
We journey further, beyond what eyes can see,  
Into realms of imagination, wild and free.

In the cosmos of words, let verses ignite,  
Sparkling stardust on a canvas of black and white.  
Let the rhythm of syllables create cosmic waves,  
Unveiling mysteries in the verse's poetry engraves.

We wander through landscapes of dreams and desires,  
Painting emotions with ink and poetic fires.  
From the rivers that flow through ancient lands,  
To the mountains that rise, touching celestial strands.

In the dance of metaphors, emotions take flight,  
Weaving stories of love, sorrow, and delight.  
In each line, a universe of meaning unfolds,  
A tapestry of emotions, tales waiting to be told.

Let us explore the depths of human connection,  
In the interplay of words, an intricate reflection.  
The threads of experience intertwined,  
Across cultures, borders, hearts unconfined.

In this poetic odyssey, we bridge the divide,  
Celebrate diversity, and worlds that collide.  
For poetry knows no bounds, no barriers to roam,  
As it touches souls, making hearts feel at home.

So, let the ink flow freely, without restraint,  
As we delve deeper into the realms of the faint.  
With each word, a brushstroke on the canvas of time,  
We continue, crafting poetry that is truly sublime.  
In the tapestry of words, we weave a story anew,  
Exploring the depths of what it means to be true.  
With each verse, we journey through time and space,  
Unveiling the hidden layers, leaving no trace.

From the streets of Prague to the plains of Zambezi,  
From the echoes of history to the songs of the free,  
We traverse landscapes of culture and heritage,  
Capturing moments in poetic leverage.

Let us dive into the river of collective memory,  
Where stories intertwine, forming a symphony.  
Through metaphors and symbols, we find common ground,  
In the shared experiences that abound.

In the borderlands, where closeness meets distance,  
We seek understanding, embracing the existence.  
For in the meeting of minds, we discover the unknown,  
Building bridges of empathy, seeds of compassion sown.

With ink as our guide, we navigate the unknown,  
Unveiling the secrets that lie in each poem.  
The power of language, a beacon of light,  
Guiding us through darkness, unveiling insights.

As the words unfold, we invite you to explore,  
The intersections of cultures, evermore.  
For in this anthology, a patchwork we create,  
A celebration of unity, in diversity innate.

So let the poetry flow, in rhythms untamed,  
Boundaries shattered; barriers reclaimed.  
In this journey of words, let's embrace the sublime,  
As we continue, crafting poetry, one line at a time.  
In the hanging of our voices, a chorus intertwines,  
Weaving tales of closeness and distance, the intricate lines.

Through verses that dance, we explore the human condition,  
Unveiling the essence of our shared intercontinental vision.

From Eastern Europe's embrace to Africa's vibrant heartbeat,  
We delve into the depths where cultures and stories meet.  
The borderlands of existence, where connections are made,  
A kaleidoscope of experiences, an exchange of shade and shade.

In the corridors of memory, we find echoes of the past,  
Whispers of ancestors, their wisdom meant to last.  
Through poetry's lens, we bring forth the unseen,  
Unravelling the complexities that lie in between.

Let us traverse the landscapes of time and space,  
Embracing the diversity of voices, each with its own grace.  
With pen in hand, we dance upon the page,  
Painting vivid images, breaking free from the cage.

In the interplay of languages, harmonies arise,  
An intercontinental symphony, where unity lies.  
With metaphors as our guides, we traverse the unknown,  
Exploring the depths of the human soul, all on our own.

So, let the poetry unfold, like petals in bloom,  
As we embrace the challenge, breaking through the gloom.  
With creativity as our compass, we journey hand in hand,  
Crafting a poetic mosaic, an offering to the land.

Continue, dear poets, let your voices resound,  
In this quest for understanding, let your words be found.  
For in the verses we create, a bridge is formed,  
Connecting hearts and minds, where harmony is performed.

Continue to paint the tapestry of closeness and distance,  
With your unique perspectives, woven with persistence.  
Together we shape a multi-contextual masterpiece,  
Celebrating the power of words, our souls released.

In the fabric of our words, a symphony unfurls,  
Whispering of closeness and distance, the stories it hurls.  
Through stanzas that dance, we embrace the unknown,  
Unveiling the essence of our shared journey to be shown.

From Central Europe's heart to Africa's rhythmic beat,  
We embark on a voyage where cultures entreat.  
The borderlands we traverse, where connections are made,  
A melange of experiences, a fusion of shades.

In the corridors of time, memories interlace,  
Revealing the echoes of past, a timeless embrace.  
Through poetic expressions, we capture the sublime,  
Unravelling the complexities of distance and time.

Let us tread the paths that lead us to new spaces,  
Embracing the diversity that each culture graces.  
With pen as our compass, we embark on this quest,  
To forge bonds of understanding, where hearts can rest.

In the interplay of languages, voices harmonise,  
An intercontinental chorus, where unity lies.  
With metaphors as brushstrokes, we paint the unseen,  
Capturing the essence of worlds that intervene.

So let the poetry continue, like a river's flow,  
Inundating our senses, letting creativity grow.  
With each line we compose, a bridge is built,  
Connecting souls across continents, woven in guilt.

Continue to craft the verses, with passion and grace,  
In this tapestry of words, find your rightful place.  
For in the beauty of poetry, we find solace and release,  
A testament to our shared humanity's ceaseless peace.

Continue to write, dear poets, let your voices soar,  
In this symphony of artistry, let your words explore.  
For through your poetry, a bond is formed,  
A testament to the power of language, in which we are adorned.

Continue to shape the narrative, with love and intent,  
In this intercontinental anthology, let your voices ascend  
For together, we weave a rich and vibrant tapestry,  
Celebrating the union of cultures, where worlds find their synergy.  
In the tapestry of our souls, a tapestry divine,  
Where closeness and distance intertwine.  
Beyond the realms of known and seen,  
A poetic journey, surreal and serene.

Through verses that transcend the ordinary,  
We traverse the borders of imagination, contrary.  
Whispering secrets of the universe untold,  
Unveiling mysteries that time can't hold.

In the symphony of words, let silence speak,  
As ink spills on the canvas, daring and unique.  
Unbound by rules, we transcend the norm,  
Exploring the depths where inspiration is born.

Let the moon's reflection guide our quill,  
As we conjure dreams, both vivid and still.  
Through metaphors and imagery, we'll explore,  
The landscapes of emotion, forevermore.

In the fusion of cultures, we find our stride,  
Blurring boundaries, where worlds collide.  
With every line, a universe takes shape,  
A poetic cosmos, ours to reshape.  
Let your words defy gravity's pull,  
Like shooting stars, lighting up the lull.  
In the spaces between, the magic resides,  
Where the familiar and foreign harmonise.

So let us continue, brave pioneers,  
Boldly crafting verses, unearthing new frontiers.  
For poetry is the language that unites,  
A bridge between darkness and shimmering lights.

Continue to dance with the muse's embrace,  
Seeking solace in the beauty of poetic grace.  
With every word, let your spirit ignite,  
For in your poetry, the world finds respite.

Continue to wander, free and untamed,  
In this poetic odyssey, forever unclaimed.  
For through your ink, new stories unfold,  
A testament to the power of words untold.

Continue to explore the depths of your soul,  
Where dreams and realities seamlessly stroll.  
In this intercontinental tapestry we weave,  
Let your poetic voice inspire and believe.

Continue, dear poet, and let your voice soar,  
As the echoes of your words reach forevermore.  
For in the vast expanse of poetic creation,  
We find solace, connection, and elation.

Continue to be different, and let your pen stray,  
In this anthology, your unique voice holds sway.  
For it is through diversity and poetic flow,  
That the essence of our shared humanity shall grow.  
In the realm of intertwining souls, a mystical dance unfolds,  
Where closeness and distance, their stories yet untold.  
Across unseen borders, our verses take flight,  
A poetic journey, guided by the moon's gentle light.

With ink as our brush, we paint vibrant scenes,  
Transcending the ordinary, breaking old routines.  
In words unbounded, we forge new trails,  
Exploring the depths where inspiration prevails.

Whispered secrets, veiled in metaphors profound,  
Unveiling the mysteries, the universe surrounds.  
In the symphony of language, let silence find its voice,  
As we sculpt emotions, giving them a choice.

Within cultures' fusion, we seek common threads,  
Blurring the lines where diverse stories spread.  
Through the rhythm of words, we bridge the divide,  
In the landscapes of emotion, we effortlessly glide.

Let us soar on the wings of imagination's flight,  
Igniting minds with visions, vivid and bright.  
For in the spaces between, magic breathes and blooms,  
Where the extraordinary finds solace in our rooms.

So, continue your poetic voyage, fearless and free,  
Crafting verses that shape new realities we see.  
In your pen lies the power to challenge and inspire,  
To move hearts, to ignite souls with poetic fire.

Dance with the muse, explore the depths within,  
As your words unravel stories, both bold and thin.  
For in the vast expanse of poetic creation's embrace,  
We find solace, connection, and wisdom's grace.  
Continue to wander, across oceans and lands,  
With lyrical steps, guided by unseen hands.  
Let your voice resound, unique and strong,  
In this intercontinental chorus, where hearts belong.

Continue, dear poet, with your pen as your guide,  
In this anthology, let your spirit abide.  
For it is through diverse voices, united as one,  
That the power of poetry shines like the sun.

Continue to be different, with each word you write,  
For your voice holds the magic to spark delight.  
In this poetic symphony, may your verses resound,  
As we weave together the threads of beauty profound.

Continue, and let your poetry paint the skies,  
With colours of passion, truth, and surprise.  
For in your words, we find solace and grace,  
A testament to the human spirit's embrace.

Continue, and in your creativity, find release,  
As you share your soul, bringing hearts at peace.  
For through the art of poetry, we can transcend,  
The boundaries that divide, and truly comprehend.

Unfolding narratives of lands near and far,  
We traverse the borders, guided by each star.  
In the cradle of cultures, where stories unfold,  
We find connection, unity, and stories untold.

Through the winding paths of history's embrace,  
We seek common ground, erasing time and space.  
In the fusion of voices, diverse and unique,  
We celebrate the beauty that differences speak.

From South-Eastern Africa to Eastern Europe's realm,  
Our poetry resonates, like a sacred hymn.  
With ink-stained fingertips, we sculpt verses sublime,  
Capturing the essence of distant lands and time.

In the whispers of nature, the rhythms of the land,  
We find the echoes of heritage, intertwined and grand.  
Through the prism of art and science, we see,  
A tapestry of wisdom, where knowledge is set free.

Let the words dance upon the page, vibrant and alive,  
As we explore the depths where imagination thrives.  
In this intercontinental patchwork, our voices unite,  
Weaving a narrative that transcends day and night.

So continue to write, dear poet, with passion and grace,  
Unleash your creativity, let your words embrace.  
For in your poetry lies the power to inspire,  
To kindle hearts with warmth, to set souls on fire.

Let your verses be a beacon, a guiding light,  
Illuminating the paths through the darkest night.  
In this anthology, your voice finds its place,  
Adding depth and beauty, leaving a lasting trace.



Continue to explore the spaces between,  
Where closeness and distance become serene.  
For in the interplay of worlds near and far,  
We find the essence of who we truly are.

Continue to be bold, be daring, be true,  
In the creation of worlds, both old and new.  
For in your poetry, you have the power to ignite,  
A sense of wonder, a longing for insight.

So, dear poet, I urge you to carry on,  
In this poetic journey, where you truly belong.  
For your words have the potential to transform and inspire,  
To connect hearts across cultures, rising higher.

Continue, and let your poetry take flight,  
With each line you write, infusing it with light.  
For in your words, the magic of storytelling lies,  
Creating a tapestry of beauty that never dies.

Continue, dear poet, with passion and grace,  
Leave an indelible mark in this poetic space.  
For your voice is unique, your perspective rare,  
Enriching the world with the stories you share.

Continue, and let your poetry shine bright,  
Unveiling the secrets of closeness and distance in flight.  
For in your hands, dear poet, lies the power to transcend,  
To bridge worlds and hearts, bringing unity to the end.

In the symphony of words, let our poetry resound,  
An intercontinental journey, where connections are found.  
Through the depths of imagination, our verses take flight,  
Unveiling the stories that blend darkness and light.

From Central-Eastern Europe to South-Eastern Africa's embrace,  
We paint vibrant landscapes, each line a stroke of grace.  
Exploring the borderlands, where cultures intertwine,  
We uncover the meaningfulness of spaces undefined.

In the dance of rituals, both ancient and new,  
We discover the essence of what it means to be true.  
With each stanza, we seek tacit knowledge untold,  
A bridge to mutual understanding, an insight to behold.

Let our verses carry the whispers of history's tale,  
As we unravel the tapestry where memories prevail.  
Through poetry's lens, we navigate closeness and distance,  
Weaving narratives that transcend time's persistence.

In the meeting of minds, where art and science align,  
We find shared meanings, a symphony divine.  
Let our words ignite the flame of curiosity,  
As we delve into the realms of human ingenuity.

With each metaphor and simile, we build bridges anew,  
Connecting hearts and souls, forging bonds that grew.  
In this anthology, let our voices blend and unite,  
Creating a multicontextual patchwork, bathed in poetic light.

So, dear poets, continue to let your creativity flow,  
Painting vivid pictures with words that glow.  
Through your verses, may understanding arise,  
And bring us closer, where love and compassion lies.

Continue to explore, to push boundaries and soar,  
Unleash your imagination, let your voices roar.  
For in your poetry, lies the power to inspire,  
To ignite change, to set the world on fire.

Continue, dear poets, with your pens held high,  
For your words have the ability to touch the sky.  
In this intercontinental journey, let your voices be heard,  
As we celebrate the beauty of each and every word.

Continue to write, to dream, to create,  
To shape a world where harmony awaits.  
For poetry has the strength to heal and transform,  
To bridge divides and weather any storm.

So, dear poets, let your voices rise,  
In this anthology, let your spirits harmonise.  
For in the narratives of closeness and distance we share,  
We discover the power of poetry, beyond compare.

Continue, and let your words dance on the page,  
In this intercontinental tapestry, we engage.  
For in the union of cultures and hearts entwined,  
We find the essence of humanity, beautifully defined.

Continue, dear poets, with passion and zeal,  
Embracing the power of poetry's appeal.  
For in your voices, the world finds solace and peace,  
As we journey together, poetic souls released.

From Uganda's vibrant plains to Tanzania's golden skies,  
A journey of unity, where destinies arise,  
South-Eastern Africa's spirit, Central Europe's grace,  
Together they form a utopia in space.

Leaders and icons emerge, transcending the divide,  
Guiding hands of wisdom, walking side by side,  
In this intercontinental realm, they unite,  
Championing change, breaking boundaries with might.

Redefining perspectives, a world anew to explore,  
Proximity and distance blur, truths to restore,  
In Central-Eastern Europe's embrace and Africa's warmth,  
Shared narratives of hope, a symphony of rebirth.

Borderlands become bridges, stories untold unfold,  
Experiences engraved in heartbeats, memories gold,  
Past, present, and future entwine with grace,  
As time's eternal dance takes its place.

In the 'in-between', where cultures meet and blend,  
New dimensions of rituals emerge, transcending end,  
Meaningfulness blossoms, in every sacred breath,  
Revealing life's essence, beyond life and death.

Indigenous knowledge whispers, secrets of the land,  
Tacit wisdom bridges gaps, hand in hand,  
From art to science, a path they intertwine,  
At the interface of truth, understanding shines.

Ode to interconnectedness, to unity's embrace,  
Central-Eastern Europe and Africa's grace,  
Threads of unity, woven strong and true,  
In this intercontinental journey, our spirits renew.

So, let's explore the near and distant, without divide,  
Bound by shared dreams, across continents wide,  
With open hearts, we find our common ground,  
In interconnectedness, true treasures are found.

In a world woven with courage and might,  
Icons emerge, casting their radiant light,  
Across borders and cultures, their influence flows,  
Guiding our paths, wherever life goes.

Władysław Reymont, his words a gift,  
A Nobel laureate's pen, spirits uplift,  
From Poland's heart, his tales unfurl,  
Enriching our souls, like precious pearls.

From the heart of Uganda, Idi Amin's reign,  
A lesson in history, a story of pain,  
Yet amidst the darkness, others arose,  
Voices for justice, where compassion glows.

In Tanzania's embrace, Nyerere stood tall,  
A beacon of unity, answering the call,  
His wisdom and vision, a nation's guide,  
Leading with grace, side by side.

Václav Havel, from Czechia's land,  
A playwright and president, he took a stand,  
For freedom and truth, his voice did resound,  
A symbol of courage, forever renowned.

Hungary's legacy, Bartók's symphony,  
Notes that bridge cultures with harmony,  
His music transcends, embracing all,  
An ode to unity, beyond the wall.

Slovakia's gift, Milan Rastislav Štefánik,  
Astronomer, aviator, dreams so chic,  
He reached for the stars, defying the skies,  
A visionary spirit that never dies.

From Zambia, Sylvia Masebo shines,  
A leader who for justice firmly aligns,  
Her advocacy echoes for conservation's plea,  
A guardian of nature, for all to see.

These icons, diverse yet entwined,  
In their stories, unity we find,  
From different lands, their spirits unite,  
Guiding us forward, with shared insight

In the symphony of life, where cultures meet,  
Musicians, poets, artists align,  
From diverse lands, their voices soar,  
In harmony and creativity, they explore.

Slovakia's gift, Eugen Suchoň's melody,  
A composer's heart, crafting a masterpiece,  
His notes resonate with the Slovak soul,  
A timeless connection, making us whole.

From Hungary's heart, Attila József's pen,  
A poet's verses, a journey within,  
His words traverse emotions deep,  
Touching hearts, secrets they keep.

Poland's canvas, Tamara de Lempicka's hue,  
A painter's vision, interpretations anew,  
Her strokes reveal stories, vibrant and bold,  
A legacy of artistry forever told.

In Czechia's embrace, Jaroslav Hašek's wit,  
A writer's humour, a world to transmit,  
Through The Good Soldier Švejk's comedic flair,  
He reflects society's follies with care.

Uganda's rhythms, Philly Lutaaya's song,  
A musician's voice, standing strong,  
His melodies speak of love and fight,  
Inspiring hearts, igniting the light.

From Tanzania's soul, Godfrey Mwampembwa,  
A cartoonist's humour, making us draw,  
His satire unveils truths untold,  
Provoking thoughts, breaking the mould.

Zambia's inspiration, Mulenga Kapwepwe,  
An artist's touch, creativity free,  
Her expression tells stories untamed,  
Empowering voices, leaving hearts inflamed.

These artists, poets, musicians of grace,  
In their craft, diverse worlds they embrace,  
From different corners, they converge,  
Their creations a testament to our shared urge.  
In melodies woven from heart to heart,  
Musicians, poets, and artists impart,  
From Slovakia's embrace, Čiurlionis' brush,  
Colours of the soul, emotions rush.

In Hungary's realm, Bartók's score,  
A musical journey, forevermore,  
His notes resonate, across the land,  
Uniting the world, with a gifted hand.

From Poland's depths, Chopin's grace,  
Piano keys dance, a timeless embrace,  
His compositions speak, without a word,  
A universal language softly heard.  
Czechia's treasure, Mucha's art,  
Elegance and beauty, he imparts,

His intricate designs, a visual delight,  
A bridge of culture, in the starry night.

Uganda's storyteller, Okot p'Bitek's pen,  
A voice for tradition, again and again,  
His verses echo, ancestral lore,  
Connecting hearts, forevermore.

In Tanzania's embrace, Liyongo's rhyme,  
Preserving the past, through space and time,  
His words carry wisdom, from ancient days,  
Guiding us forward, in many ways.

From Zambia's soul, Kapwepwe's grace,  
A playwright, leader, a cultural embrace,  
His words and vision, a legacy grand,  
Uniting the people, across the land.

These artists, poets, musicians so bright,  
Illuminate our world with creative light,  
From different lands, their voices entwine,  
In the tapestry of art, unity shines.

In the uniqueness of nature's embrace,  
Heritage sites stand with ancient grace,  
From Slovakia's High Tatras' peaks so high,  
To Tanzania's Serengeti where wildlife roams the sky.

Hungary's Hortobágy, a vast, open plain,  
Where cranes dance and life's stories remain,  
Czechia's Český Krumlov, a fairytale town,  
Interwoven with history, where dreams are sown.

Poland's Białowieża Forest, a living treasure,  
Home to the bison, in harmony and leisure,  
Uganda's Rwenzori Mountains touch the sky,  
An ethereal realm where peaks ascend so high.

Among Zambia's treasures, Victoria Falls stands,  
Nature's masterpiece, a creation by hands,  
Tribes across borders, with stories to share,  
Their ancient wisdom, in the air.

From Slovakia's Tatras to Zambia's falls,  
Tribes reside within nature's walls,  
Their cultures, traditions, ancestral lore,  
Interconnected, forevermore.

In Hungary's plains and Tanzania's Serengeti,  
Tribes carry on, with strength and unity,  
Czechia's towns and Uganda's mountains,  
Tribes' legacies flow like endless fountains.

From Poland's forests to Zambia's skies,  
Tribes' voices echo, ancient ties,  
Interwoven tapestries of heritage grand,  
A shared connection, across the land.





**A boundless,  
changing,  
water-like form  
that can contain  
all sorts of  
meanings indeed**

KAROLINA MARCINKOWSKA

# Towards a Body-Conscious Knowledge

*HERSTORIES springing from Polish  
and Rwandan sources*

I will start my flow of thoughts (strongly seduced by poetry and the rhetoric of a personal essay instead of the rigidity of an academic paper) by the following remark: whatever cultural background we have, we are always bound to and in a way repressed by our culturally-based perception. Decolonising our minds by setting them free and trying to find different people, stories, and closer places, will practically always require us to use our language, something which is a strong cultural construct, based on our beliefs, ways of expressing the world as we define it, which are limited by our knowledge, personal background, and understanding.

My main priorities in both research and writing are being conscious of the uniqueness of each culture and each person immersed in it. I do this out of respect and humbleness. I would never dare to call myself a “specialist” in a certain topic, culture, or field of study, only because I tried to find my own way of researching and describing a chosen subject. That is the reason why I would love to read texts that openly express the random character of our choices, the fascinating labyrinth of personal experiences and coincidences. Looking for new dimensions of both “reading” and writing people’s experiences, I keep on trying to go beyond the well-known scientific, anthropological methods and classifications, by choosing a deeply personal

approach, which would touch the realms of poetry, undefined and tacit feelings, random thoughts and loose inspirations.

Searching for innovative ways of looking both at my own culture (with me being immersed in it) and at my field-research experience as an anthropologist in different – including African – countries, I realised that the only way of exploring distance places and the so-called “otherness”, could be to rely on the potential and uniqueness of a conscious and feeling body.

Therefore, the aim of the following text is to describe by means of free thoughts and associations, some shared meanings between Poland and Rwanda (which happen to be the context of my last fieldwork), which emerge from a feeling body. I will then try to propose a text, where the body – precisely the female body – and a poetic, deeply personal way of writing, can represent a bridge to mutual understanding. By putting on paper the free flow of feelings and personal experiences, I will try to show that this “bridge” can be used as a valuable tool in understanding and describing other topics: Rwanda, Poland and other places, and stories mentioned here will be treated merely as examples.

The giving of special attention to women’s perspective or emphasising it – either by means of art, science, politics or just being embedded in everyday discourse – seems to still be regarded as “just” a feminist viewpoint and as such – a marginal, even extravagant, subject. One can at least say that about my country of origin, Poland, both within the current right-wing politics and in formal education, where it is the case that if women’s sexuality arises as a subject in the public sphere, it is more than guaranteed that it won’t be unashamedly acknowledged and embraced by a larger body.

A body, but specifically the female body – indeed, which is still not treated, contemplated, and featured with similar care and openness as the male body. Surprisingly, it seems that this discrepancy also refers to the private realm: the one that we should be able to feel by ourselves, by means of our own bodies and senses. Undoubtedly the notion of the female sex and any representation of a body part related to it persists as a taboo subject in Poland. This fact becomes alarming when it is more than just a taboo or an “alternative” topic discussed in groups regarded as marginal (artists, activists, writers), rather when it

happens, it is openly banned and suppressed by a more powerful, dominant, conservative group. Or this is even carried out by women, when they are among themselves, in a supposedly intimate and safe environment.

In the Polish context, the distance – or I would even say – the disconnection from our own bodies and sexuality, notably intensified by the Roman Catholic background of both culture and family setting, becomes striking when compared to the contemporary Rwandan practices of informal sexual education and their approach to sexuality and its connotations. The connection of many Rwandans to ancient cultural heritage and orally transmitted myths is more than unique – although of course not much evidence has remained until our times. I am far from claiming, though, that this subject in Rwanda is free from controversies. However, here we come to the core of my narrative: it is the body, the woman's body in its sexual condition that is thus encouraged to be the witness of one's identity (one could argue that even – national identity!) and the basis of self-awareness.

Since I have turned my attention to a conscious observation of my own body and all that it is communicating to me, I have also opened myself to a strong belief (no matter how it can be called in whatever religion) that nothing happens without purpose, and life can be taken as a drop in the ocean (not in a bucket). A feeling that both encloses and exceeds all of one's cultural conditioning. Following my intuition, and being open to all kinds of signs, I discovered for myself the vocation of offering massages – which I treated from the beginning as a conscious, near-spiritual form of meditation and a direct way of communicating with another person. Me – the one who defines herself primarily as a woman and – immediately afterward – as a Cultural Anthropologist incessantly looking for the most true and deep connection with the Other, found in the listening touch (indeed, *Seeing Hands* – this is how an amazing Rwandan group of a massage therapist with visual impairments called their company<sup>4</sup>) a way to sense the other person and myself without words and mediators.

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4 <https://seeinghandsrwanda.org/>

Listening to my inner voice and following my flow, I dedicated and decorated one special room in my house for the sake of these “massage meetings”<sup>5</sup>. “Meetings” meaning not just “massages” – this is actually the only definition that comes to me when I consider the holistic quality of these sessions, which usually go with their impact far beyond a pure act of touching/giving a massage. Not without a feeling of astonishment and surprise did I find out that images of naked women: from vintage *femme fatales* to saints, porno stars and African fertility dolls, started to inhabit my spa and to indirectly nurture women who visit me there. By the way, spa is the abbreviation of ‘Sanus per aquam’ – ‘health through water’ – which is actually very significant in the context of what I will try to describe in this paper.

It soon became obvious to me that when one offers unconditional care, empathetic attention and a real presence by the means of touch, carefulness and a time to listen as well as to “accompany” the person during and after the massage itself, the receiver will always get closer to themselves. With more time and an increase in the number of massage meetings I have offered, I became more and more astonished by how little knowledge and self-confidence many of us have (mainly women – the majority of visitors to my spa), towards the fact that our physical self is connected to all the things we go through and beyond.

“*The body keeps the score*” – quoting the title of Dr. Bessel van der Kolk’s book<sup>6</sup>, which refers especially to trauma (it is difficult to not mention this topic when talking about any psychic condition of today’s world population, and certainly about contemporary Rwanda and Poland – each to a different extent and for different reasons exceeding the content of this essay) and the way it literally reshapes both the body and the brain. In addition, Van der Kolk also exposes the astonishing power of our relationships both to hurt and healing. What is worth pointing out here is that the word “relationship” refers

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5 Using a wordplay that refers to two different meanings of the word “zmasowany”: “a person who received massage” and “massive”, I named my homelike wellness centre – “Zmasowany Atak spa”, which can be translated both as “Massive Attack spa” and “Attack by offering massage – spa”.

6 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score. Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*, Penguin. London, 2015.

to both a connection between people, and an intimate, tender<sup>7</sup> proximity to ourselves, and to our bodies.

Following the idea of my belief in the flow of life, I don't consider it a mere coincidence that I can unfold in this text my idea to combine three realms: my experiences and inspirations found in the so-called "field" (recently Rwanda), selected stories relative to women's discourse from my everyday cultural and artistic context (Poland), and all that I have realised through my passion: offering "massage meetings" to women.

As the Other always remains a priority for me, I will never treat as a mere coincidence the matter of who is contributing to the accomplishment of any project that – coming back to the water metaphor – surges from the heart. The friend who informed me about the possibility to write a unique narrative (hopefully the one you are reading right now), which will present "innovative ways of looking at what is near and far", was my close friend Jakub Kościółek, Adjunct Professor at the Institute of Intercultural Studies of Jagiellonian University and President of The Interkulturalni.pl Association. Once a year, I have been invited by him to hold a lecture about the possible postcolonial readings of so-called African Art, and each time I was impressed by his openness and empathetic approach to my way (and other kinds of "freaks" as well) of being and seeing things. Thank you Jakub!

In this context, it is also not surprising for me that I was offered the possibility of a barter (me giving a massage) to my friend Urszula Rapacka, who accepted my kind request of

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7 Noteworthy here is the booming popularity of the word tenderness – "czułość", "czuły" – in the Polish language and recent cultural context. One can guess that the comeback of this word can be attributed to the title of the lecture delivered by the winner of the 2018 Nobel Prize for literature – Olga Tokarczuk: *The Tender Narrator* (the whole lecture is available online on the Nobel Prize site: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/>). For Tokarczuk, *czułość* is a very specific kind of tender sensitivity, it is "spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling" – explains Eliza Kącka in *Academia PAN* online journal. ([https://journals.pan.pl/Content/118837/PDF/O4-O7\\_Kacka\\_ang.pdf](https://journals.pan.pl/Content/118837/PDF/O4-O7_Kacka_ang.pdf)). Soon after Tokarczuk became our fifth Polish winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, a book written by a psychologist, Natalia de Barbaro, entitled (literal translation:) *A tender guide. A woman's way to herself* (*Czuła przewodniczka. Kobięca droga do siebie*, wyd. Agora, 2021) became more than trendy among women looking for their own way to self-knowledge and empowerment.

proof-reading this text. This spontaneous incident embraces – both symbolically and in practice – the essence of this text. Thank you, Ula! (Furthermore, to make the story of coincidences even more striking, I will add that Ula once became the owner of a fertility doll that I found in one of the art markets in Ghana that was remarkably similar to her...!).

## **Coincidences from very, very near and afar – about water and body consciousness**

My first attempt to have a deeper observation of this blending of themes was actually inspired by the subject of a national Congress of Cultures held in October 2021 in Nowy Sącz in Poland, where I was invited to deliver a lecture based on the topic of *Such source, such water. Priestesses, sorceresses, temptresses*<sup>8</sup>. I decided then to put a special emphasis on water symbolism in connection to womanhood in some selected African traditions, ceremonies, or beliefs. I intentionally introduced to the public some cultural texts – systems, beliefs, tools, and behaviours, that reveal cultural meanings that are both contemporary and embedded in tradition. They all incorporate (by definition: “to put or introduce into a body as an integral part or parts” – a perfect verb in this context) a heterogeneous, manifold code of breaking all definitions and culturally assigned categories, usually handed down to these cultures from colonialism or – broader – a Roman Catholicism/missionary-based, patriarchal, white culture.

The first of these culture texts that I mentioned was the remarkable multi-contextual source of the belief in the Mami Wata mermaid throughout Africa. Her iconography – probably handed down from a German (!) poster printed in the 1880s, representing a Samoan (!! ) boy (taken for a girl) posing with a snake – reveals at once her multifaceted and controversial

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<https://kultura-regionow.pl/jakie-zrodlo-taka-woda/> / 20.10.2021 – *Symbolika wody w wybranych kulturach Afryki*, thematic panel: *Jakie źródło, taka woda. Kapłanki, czarodziejki, kusicielki* / VII Kongres Kultury Regionów w Nowym Sączu



nature<sup>9</sup>. Her image and attributes refer to her seductive beauty, which offers both a heavenly perspective and deprives her followers from everything they have if they don't remain faithful (above all sexually) to her. The concepts of water, fertility, sexuality and ambiguous powers of women are exposed in this topic.

Following that, I brought up my personal experience of taking part in the 57<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition Biennale in Venice in 2017, as one of the hundred women co-creating the performance of the Nigerian artist Jelili Atiku<sup>10</sup>. The impressive, ceremony-like homage to women and the feminine element (again – water) was meant to “reactivate human nature” and “decolonise spaces” (to quote the artist) by conveying the voice to women as “empresses” of water in the feminine city *par excellence* – Venice.

Finally, I raised a discussion on the subject of the fascinating revival of *gukuna* female ceremony and the issue of achieving *kunyaza* orgasm by women (also called the “female water” or “squirting ejaculation”) in Rwanda. I succeeded in briefly touching on this subject during a short field research I made on behalf of the swps University and Polish-German Foundation by taking part in a scientific project about Polish and German sources in precolonial Rwanda<sup>11</sup>.

The topic of my Ph.D. fieldwork in Madagascar: *the cult of tromba* ancestors’ – was also included in the lecture<sup>12</sup>. It is remarkable how our approach to a certain subject can develop and acquire new meanings when seen through a new optic: that I had given more attention to the female body and its connotations, a new reading of the Malagasy *tromba* ceremony came

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9 (in:) Henry John Drewal, *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*, ed. by the Museum of Cultural History, U.S., 2008

10 The recording of “*Mama Say Make I Dey Go, She Dey My Back*” performance by Jelili Atiku at the preview of the 57<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition in Venice, Arsenal, May 12 2017 – to watch on the Biennale Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HksbgVJ5KuE>

11 My contribution to the project output was the chapter: *Spoken Heritage: Pre-colonial Rwanda from the Contemporary Rwandan Perspective*, in: *Every Day Life in Early Colonial Rwanda. Insights from German and Polish Sources*, Klaus Bachmann in co-operation with Karolina Marcinkowska, Joanna Bar and Marius Kowalak, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2020, p. 9-29. Available in OpenAccess: <https://tiny.pl/99j31>

12 A book based on my PhD dissertation was published under the title: *Re-creating the past. The Tromba cult in Madagascar (Od-tworzyć przeszłość. Kult czumba na Madagaskarze*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, Gdańsk 2016).

to my mind. A medium of the ancestor spirit is not a particular woman with her culturally established functions, but actually her body – the vessel par excellence. A boundless, changing, water-like form that can contain all sorts of meanings indeed.

Talking about so-called coincidences, a few months after the Congress, I had the opportunity to hold a similar lecture at the Polish seaside, with the silent presence of the sea itself in the background – in the City Culture Institute in Gdańsk. This time, it was followed by a discussion with the public – among them were both women of all ages and divergent attitudes toward sexuality, as well as people with strong assumptions based on stereotypes of Africa as a “dark and primitive” continent with narrow-minded, “undeveloped” (?) customs and behaviours.

I was quite surprised when – as the lecture advanced – I noticed that the public showed more and more consternation and even outrage when I touched on the current situation in Poland regarding sex education (precisely – a lack of or even a ban on it) and – as it resulted in conversation – a low body consciousness. The striking fact was that I somehow felt influenced by signs of shame and behaviour indicating a desire to escape/disappear, and as a result, my voice – as is usually the case when I feel out of my “flow” – started to tremble. It became apparent that the so-called sex that we are surrounded by: images, films, provocative fashion, vulgar photos of objectified women – have absolutely no impact anymore, and are swallowed by us in an absolutely careless and indifferent way. However, if one calls a vagina by its name, treating it as a natural part of the body (not only as an instrument of reproductive “mission”) and referring to the right of conscious and deliberate pleasure – all these will provoke a big consternation.

Someone could argue that maybe it was because of the “educational”, formal context of this lecture, its venue (the Culture City Institute) or its title (dealing with Africa, water, and heritage), that embarrassment and the disturbing feeling arose of not being able to embrace our own body fully as a sexual, biological, emotional body. Nonetheless, the observation of a general disorientation and lack of confidence towards the topic of female sexuality additionally awakened my attention when I participated in several online workshops on positive

sexuality – representing quite a new social and philosophical trend in Poland.

“We invite you to a world where sexuality is seen as an element of human functioning – unthreatening to an individual, guiltfree and shameless” – this is an excerpt of the idea of the Sex Positive Institute in Warsaw<sup>13</sup>. Even though the virtual format should rather add confidence and not increase embarrassment to the participants, both sexes (although the majority of the participants were women) expressed a major disconnection to this topic – more or less openly, adding irony (mostly men) or self-accusation (mostly women). “Being ‘sex positive’ means seeing all consensual sexual activities (agreed to by all participants) as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable, it encourages feeling sexual pleasure and experimenting” – one can read on the website of the Institute. Checking now the schedule of workshops led by one of the sex coaches and trainers – Agnieszka Szeżyńska – and having in mind the tremendous shame that dominated most of the female participants, the popularity of the workshop called: “Needs: the practice of expressing needs and saying ‘yes’”, doesn’t surprise me.

Marta Niedźwiecka, psychologist, sex coach, and co-author of the book *Slow Sex. Liberate Love*<sup>14</sup> observes that having in mind the Polish political and cultural background, “slow sex is about airing the head and regaining contact with the body, and not necessarily – acquiring sophisticated techniques and diving into the secrets of mindfulness, which is beginning to “eat its own tail”. How to have slow sex and successful relationships when you have to protest on the streets with a banner saying “I am scared of fucking”? The whole movement of individual development around sexuality, which is gaining more and more interest in Poland, on the one hand is a response to the great deficit of sexual education, but on the other – a way towards Foucault’s “self-arranging technique”<sup>15</sup>.

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13 <http://en.sexpositiveinstitute.pl/about-us/>

14 Hanna Rydlewska, Marta Niedźwiecka, *Slow sex. Uwolnij miłość*, Agora, 2021

15 From the interview with Marta Niedźwiecka conducted by Paulina Januszewska, *Kto nam zepsuł seks? Nie tylko Kościół i kapitalizm*, 2021.04.17, <https://krytyka.polityczna.pl/nauka/psychologia/kto-nam-zepsul-seks-nie-tylko-kosciol-i-kapitalizm/>

Listening to the many women coming to my massage meetings and observing the cultural trends and the self-development workshop “industry” in Poland, I agree with Niedźwiecka that particularly women are increasingly getting involved in the constant and never-satisfying process of self-improvement, which aims to increase their productivity, without necessarily making them more open to intimacy, body awareness and sexual (in the wide sense of the term) pleasure. “Organising and suppressing sexuality takes various forms – of rigid norms, penalties for non-compliance, visions of sin, condemnation that mark this area of human activity. We learn from childhood that things “down there” are dirty, that the body itself is suspect. How are we supposed to trust the body and build contact with it – which is necessary to experience our own sexuality?” says Niedźwiecka (2021). Women’s chances to develop will be low if we keep on depreciating physicality, sexuality, and our liberated emotions.

“Without awareness of bodily feeling and attitude, a person becomes split into a disembodied spirit and a disenchant-ed body” – said Alexander Lowen (2011), psychotherapist and father of Bioenergetics, whose research and ideas greatly affect my relationship towards body work. A strong control that we impose upon ourselves and our own bodies (seen usually just as functional mechanisms that make our mind work and keep us somehow on the surface of the flow of life – water! – protecting us against drowning), is actually similar to the fear of falling. Lowen continues by stating the following: “because we are afraid of life, we seek to control or master it”. In one of his books<sup>16</sup>, he noticed an interesting similarity in the English words: *falling asleep* and *falling in love*. Indeed from the bodily point of view, the transition from being awake to sleeping can be compared with falling, and as such causes concern and tension. The thinking process has to be shut down and will no longer be superintendent by the mind.

The dynamics of both processes (sleeping and loving) are similar – related to the switching off of the mind and body control. The secret of falling is to surrender to it, allowing the

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16 Alexander Lowen, *Bioenergetyka. O tym, jak poprzez ciało leczyć problemy umysłu*, Centrum pracy z ciałem, Koszalin, 2011.

energy to flow through our body fearlessly. The act of surrender, or, coming back to the main concept of this text – feeling the water element in ourselves – is crucial for allowing ourselves to feel all kinds of pleasures: from the one that comes during a relaxing massage to the overwhelming experience of an orgasm. “To understand why falling has such a powerful effect, we should think of life as a movement. Not moving is death” – Lowen (2011) says. He goes further by stating: “Sexuality is not a leisure or part-time activity. It is a way of being”.

## **Let’s start from the vagina – not enough or too much?**

In the book *Fuck shame. A history of sexual revolution*<sup>17</sup>, Ewa Wanat writes:

“When you have free sexuality, a free body, when you know how you function, you learn to name your own feelings, so you completely change your position in the world, you can make different decisions. We have known only for some decades what the clitoris really looks like. Why doesn’t it become common knowledge? Every child can draw a penis, but a clitoris? If a woman stays unfamiliar with her body, she has no contact with it, no knowledge of it, so it will be easier to use her. Instrumentalise her as a reproductive machine. The more she knows, the more she can make decisions about her own life”.

Jess Zimmerman, author of the highly inspiring book, recently translated into Polish entitled *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology*<sup>18</sup>, applies mythological archetypes to her own personal experiences and perversely interprets well-known Greek myths, calling them “fairy tales told by the patriarchy to itself before sleep”. On this basis, she encourages women to cherish features and behaviours that are culturally seen as “not appropriate” and too “wild” for “the weaker sex”.

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17 Ewa Wanat, *Pieprzyć wstyd. Historia rewolucji seksualnej*, Filtry, 2022.

18 Jess Zimmermann, *Kobiety i inne potwory. Tworzenie nowej mitologii*, Czarne, 2023, translated by Hanna Pustuła-Lewicka.

One piece of advice she offers to women is to re-examine their relationships with culturally undesirable traits like hunger, anger, ugliness, and ambition, but also being overtly sexual or not sexy enough.

“Being outside the norm”, “unnatural” or even monstrous, are actually – Zimmerman says – women’s greatest strengths. Maybe that is why in my spa room dedicated to massage meetings, proud *femme fatales* and nude sunbathers with bodies far from the mannequin type, exist side-by-side. All of them are “in the margins” of what is recognised by men (but also normatively approved by most women) as harmlessly seductive or too perverted and just “exaggerated”. Women are educated to practise a constant emotional deprivation and “hunger of feelings”: they are constantly advised “to want less so you will not suffer from shortage” – Zimmerman writes. “Any desire can be taken as greed if it is forbidden – for example, sex. The fact that men have an appetite for sex is considered completely normal and is even used as an excuse. When a woman wants sex, we look away in disgust. Getting caught when “wanting” is the worst kind of insult”.

In the **Polish context**, one doesn’t have to look far for examples of such a conviction. Just while I was writing this text, a new song from the album called *Wolne* (which in the Polish language means both “free women” and “slow”) entitled *Gadgets* was launched and broadly commented upon online. The album was recorded for the SBM Label, the leading recording company of the Polish rap scene (known among others for such legendary rappers as Solar, Bedoes, and Mata), firmly rooted in male-centric narratives, reflected both in the statistically dominant presence of young men among the public or broader – rap community and the artists that create texts based on the male point of view.

The author of the album *Wolne* is Dorota Maślowska – a famous writer and a great ironic observer of Polish reality as well as a mistress of words. When receiving the prestigious *Polityka* magazine award as Culture Creator for 2022, she said:

“The culture in Poland is anti-women, and I was a victim, beneficiary and passive witness of this culture.”<sup>19</sup>

The twelve songtexts on the album and their minimal music surrounding them, reflect – among others – an aim to look for a language that expresses female erotica and the atmosphere of shame/taboo dominant in today’s Poland that surrounds the language, images and depictions of it. The lyrics of the songs and also the whole album can be considered to be a “condensation of reality down to a pill”, as the artist said justifying her choice of the rap form in one of her interviews, provoked a massive attack against her (not the first one based on the same premises) as a result of her straightforward way of describing women’s sexual needs. In an interview, Masłowska says: “I am very interested in the issue of expressing sexuality in rap – on the basis of what my language has to say about it, how I feel about it, what I can offer. The most open form of music on this subject seems to be the popular Polish music, which I would refer to as “reproductive”, namely disco polo, which approves the expression of lust from both men and women. Pop is rather bashful: sex is replaced by “taking you in my arms” and “waking up in the morning.” Rap takes sex quite openly and that’s one of its subversive spirits”<sup>20</sup>.

Regardless of to what the extent to which we are surrounded by aggressive, male-based, sexual images and cosmos (I am purposely using this term here), what provokes animosity and resistance is the female perception and feelings about their own bodies, openly featured beyond their “functionality” which that forces us to remain switched on the level of a sexual-male-fantasy, or being in a fertility and maternity mode. The objectifying male (and also female!) gaze and patterns of “how women should feel, think and behave” towards their own sexuality, are in fact rooted deeper into our culturally-imbued

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19 <https://plejada.pl/newsy/dorota-maslowska-w-poruszajacym-przemowieniu-mowi-o-antykobiecej-kulturze/8cogzvf>

20 Interview with Dorota Masłowska by Łukasz Łachecki, February 04, 2023 <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/muzyka/lukasz-lachecki-dorota-maslowska-literatura-muzyka-glos-kobiet-meska-przemoc/>

imagination and have more impact on us than we think<sup>21</sup>. The conviction that I would like to share here, is that in today's Poland we, both women and men, still haven't developed culturally acceptable tools, that could be freely used to describe and experience pleasure all its shades and diversities other than the freedom to consciously see and listen to our bodies,

Here is my rough translation of the Dorota Masłowska song "Gadgets":

"I got the courage to buy sexual gadgets by kilo, it doesn't matter if they were second hand, but in very good condition, cheap. (...) I'm tired of waiting, I need promiscuity (...) I open the building, the neighbours ask what I have in the bag, I lie that it's potatoes but sex toys stick out! Panic in the whole building, they'll tell it to the father, mother, but I don't feel ashamed, today I'm flying into space – bye! (...) Au Revoir dicks, meow meow<sup>22</sup>".

Fair enough, Niko Graczyk, a NOIZZ magazine journalist, called Masłowska's album "an interesting social experiment", and continued, "For fans of the sbm label – young, but musically conservative and attached to the male ethos of hip-hop – Dorota's music is like a red rag to a bull. And how is her "Wolne" album? It's like having butterflies in your stomach. To some people they provoke vomiting, to others the desire of falling in love, though probably unhappily"<sup>23</sup>.

The cited comparison brings my flow of thoughts right to this point: if one starts to listen to what the body says, one will probably get to a much more authentic manifestation of our needs, longings and fears, far superior to the one that is

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21 The visual arts' way of presenting women as sexual objects is the subject of a recently screened documentary entitled *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* (2022). The Author – Nina Menkes – shows the dominant and powerful *male gaze* (term coined by Laura Mulvey in the now iconic essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" from 1975) visible in most of the Hollywood iconic films.

22 "Zdobyłam się na odwagę, kupiłam seksualne gadżety na wagę, nie ważne, że używane, w bardzo dobrym stanie, tanie. (...) Dość już mam czekania, potrzeba mi wyuzdania (...) Otwieram klatkę tam sąsiadki, pytają się co mam w siatce, kłamię że ziemniaki lecz wystają seksualne zabawki! Popłoch w całej klatce, powiedzą ojcu matce, lecz ja wstydu nie czuję, dziś w kosmos odlatuję – nara! (...) Au Revoir kutasy, miau miau", [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOS3xAUNUko](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOS3xAUNUko), April 23 2023

23 Niko Graczyk, *Od nowej Doroty ma się w brzuchu motyle. Niektórych mdli, innych ściska za gardło*, [noizz.pl/muzyka/polska-niegotowa-sluchalismy-nowej-plyty-doroty-maslowskiej/49hbnwt](https://noizz.pl/muzyka/polska-niegotowa-sluchalismy-nowej-plyty-doroty-maslowskiej/49hbnwt), April 23 2023.



culturally (and as such – restricted to temporality and social context) approved. If we literally listened to what kind of butterflies or worms are wandering around our stomach, if we let the emotions vibrate, and felt the coming and going waves of all sorts of pain, pleasure, and discomfort instead of strangling them at once by means of painkillers and pills, or by trying at all costs to fit in a certain culturally or religiously approved definition of appropriate, gender-fit behaviour – we could get to a deeper understanding of ourselves and more conscious communication with others. We would literally create culture and social sphere from the gut.

“During physical experiences, thinking is strictly forbidden<sup>24</sup>” – wrote Michalina Wysocka, gynaecologist, sexologist, and author of the first bestseller guide to sexual life among communist countries entitled *The Art of Loving, A Practical Guide to Marital Bliss*, published in 1978 and re-edited many times, which slowly started a trend of growing openness about matters of sex and sex life in Poland. This approach could be extended far above sexual life: nowadays we are cut off from sensuality and carnality. Feeling – even during such a personal experience as receiving a massage – often seems to fall into a dualism strongly established by the idea of a noble spirit and reason (culturally seen as male) and an impure body (female).

We have lost contact with our body, and we’ve moved away from the integrity of spirit and body. Stating it from the point of view of a massage therapist, I could say that most of us are cut off from the waist down. As the proverb says (it would be even hard to look for its cultural origin, as it is known in many parts of the world): “Gods inherited only the upper part of the body, the lower part belongs to the devil”.

One can see the starting point of a deeply rooted fear and shame of the female body – especially the parts that can bring her pleasure – in the unconscious belief of the ‘vagina dentata’ (Latin for *toothed vagina*). Sezin Koehler, an informal ethnographer and novelist, specified that stories of the mythical *vagina dentata* exist in virtually every culture. “Men’s fears of castration (are) compounded by an inherited cultural belief of sexual entitlement function as foundational pillars of

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24 Michalina Wysocka, *Sztuka kochania*, Agora, 2016, 28.

masculinity, and patriarchies respond by attempting to control women's "dangerous" sexualities and bodies" – she writes<sup>25</sup>. Strikingly, even (or – we should say – *even before* everybody else seen as a scientist) Freud ardently believed that this fear and its outcome – the "castration anxiety" – shaped not only male sexuality but also the sexuality of women who, he argued, are consumed by 'penis envy'.

Discrediting or even demonising a particular body part, embedding it in politics, or excluding it from the one and only permitted morality, can seem absurd in today's reality, but it still exists. What's more – surprisingly – it doesn't differ much with its absurdity from the concept of *vagina dentata*. Furthermore, a striking example of such public condemnation happened not so far from my house in Warsaw, the capital of a democratic country, which is Poland. Not to mention that the whole situation took place in an art context, in a theatre, precisely in the foyer of Dramatic Theatre, situated in the most recognisable, iconic building in Warsaw – the Palace of Culture and Science – a symbol of socialist power and the pride of People's Republic of Poland.

On the occasion of Monika Strzępka becoming director of the theatre (it is worth noting that she is the first woman to hold this position!) the artist Iwona Demko made a minimalist, shimmering golden installation hosted in the theatre's foyer, called 'Wilgotna Pani' – 'Moist Lady' – to highlight women's power and impact, both beauty and social invisibility.

Before I continue, here's a small introduction to the two artists: Strzępka has been grounded both in more than twenty years' experience of artistic practice together with theoretical studies directed towards – as she writes – the disclosure of "the mechanisms of hierarchy, power and violence in Polish theatre taking into account the perspective of a woman director"<sup>26</sup>. Demko, born – as she likes to highlight – on the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of finding the Venus of Willendorf – is a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow and a self-proclaimed "vagina

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25 Sezin Koehler, *Pussy Bites Back: Vagina Dentata Myths From Around the World*, [www.vice.com/en/article/payq79/pussy-bites-back-vagina-dentata-myths-from-around-the-world](http://www.vice.com/en/article/payq79/pussy-bites-back-vagina-dentata-myths-from-around-the-world), May 9 2023

26 Monika Strzępka, *Reżyserka w teatrze*, in: *Didaskalia* 169/170, June-August 2022

artist”. “I wanted women to love this part of the body and start thinking positively about it,” said Demko about the artwork made for the theatre. That is why she wanted the vagina to be cute, pretty, shining with sequins’ with beads, trinkets and soft materials, in order to recall a land of joy, sweetness and pleasure.

However, this point of view was not enthusiastically embraced by most PiS (Law and Justice – the current ruling party in Poland) politicians, among them Konstanty Radziwiłł, by then governor of the province in which Warsaw is located. He claimed that Strzępka herself used her new position to promote LGBT rights and “radical feminism insulting women’s honour”, whose highest, the most scandalous symbol would be – according to him – the almond-shaped, golden work of art. Radziwiłł argued that the sculpture, “demeans women by reducing femininity to a purely biological aspect that boils down to satisfying sexual needs”<sup>27</sup>. Together with an ultra-conservative Polish legal organisation – Ordo Iuris – he announced that an investigation into a “violation of religious feeling and the depiction of pornographic content” should be made, and the new female director dismissed<sup>28</sup>.

“Most contemporaries find the phallic cult rather obvious – we’ve all heard of it, thousands of pages have been written about it. I’ve always been curious about the cult of vagina and couldn’t accept the possibility that female genitals were never appreciated” – writes Demko in her text “Respect the Vagina”<sup>29</sup>. In an interview about how she became fascinated by the vagina, she says: “I realised that I felt uncomfortable speaking the word “vagina” out loud in company. I was embarrassed. I was wondering what it was related to. Why is this happening?

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27 Daniel Tilles, *Warsaw theatre director dismissed over “radical feminism” and golden vagina sculpture*, Nov 25 2022, online: [notesfrompoland.com/2022/11/25/warsaw-theatre-director-dismissed-over-radical-feminism-and-golden-vagina-sculpture/](https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/11/25/warsaw-theatre-director-dismissed-over-radical-feminism-and-golden-vagina-sculpture/)

28 In the period immediately after writing these lines, on April 26, the Provincial Administrative Court in Warsaw thankfully revoked the decision of the Mazowieckie Voivodeship to suspend the management of director Monika Strzępka at Teatr Dramatyczny.

29 Iwona Demko, *Respect the vagina*, [iwonademko.pl/autorka/KMAG\\_30\\_Szacun\\_dla\\_waginy.pdf](https://iwonademko.pl/autorka/KMAG_30_Szacun_dla_waginy.pdf), May 9 2023.

Where does it come from? Then I noticed that men have more openness to the body, and women less<sup>30</sup>.

This is high time to give light to the fact that is not really “just” the vagina that I and many other women are interested in – but the need to change perceptions about a powerful and authentic womanhood not traumatised anymore by the long-sanctioned fear of women’s “demonic” body. In my opinion, all that Demko did, in a highly artistic, tender way, was to remind us that women have and actually are bodies that need rituals, pure pleasure and sisterhood in order to help them to become conscious of their own, embodied power.

## Sacred water, body and sisterhood

“Let me tell you a story” – with these words begins the film “Sacred water<sup>31</sup>”, directed by Olivier Jourdain. A gentle voice in the captivating Kinyarwanda language unfolds the story as follows: “Coming from the most intimate of hidden places, one day at sunrise, the queen dried her mat that was drenched from the night. Hitting the floor, the drops formed a brook, which formed a small river. The small river turned into a large one and finally formed a lake, Lake Kivu. Nowadays men keep drifting on the lake, day and night, looking for the origin of life”.

It is striking how in this story, the rhythms of nature, landscape and female desires interlace themselves – alongside a similar relation of past, present and future contexts. Similar relationships can be noticed in the way in which *kunyaza* – the female ejaculation and orgasmic pleasure – are seen by both women and men: as both pride and honour, that bring satisfaction and reconciliation between two people. In the documentary, men are sharing their opinion on the subject: “they [women] ejaculate their emotions” and “making love is like playing soccer. You have to be fairplay so that both of you can score”. One adds not without pride: “please, tell the Whites they should look for it as well”.

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30 Magdalena M. Baran, *Przypomnij mi kobiecość – wywiad z Iwoną Demko*, March 8 2019, Liberté magazine online, [liberte.pl/przypomnij-mi-kobiecosc](http://liberte.pl/przypomnij-mi-kobiecosc).

31 *Sacred Water* is a 2016 documentary directed and produced by Olivier Jourdain. <https://sacredwater-movie.com/>

Vestine Dusabe, a radio host and sex educator with a mission of promoting and preserving Rwanda's culture of female pleasure, regularly broadcasts a programme called *Happy couples*. "The practice of kunyaza – female ejaculation – has become a kind of sexual norm in Rwanda in stark contrast to a global sexuality aimed at the satisfaction of men" – she says, somehow highlighting the decolonial flavour to the increased popularity that this subject is regaining in the post-genocide Rwanda. It would be still a drop in the ocean if we stated that genocide has smashed physical and human capital and perverted social and cultural capital. "The residual energy generated by fight, flight, or freeze responses to traumatic events can cause a myriad of physical and mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, and short and long term somatic symptoms<sup>32</sup>". It is more than recommended to focus on the body when it comes to transcending traumas.

In Vestine's opinion, making the topic of sexuality, sexual education and the need for pleasure visible, have also among their side effects the empowerment of women.

An important, traditionally transmitted way of sharing knowledge about the female body, sexual norms and pleasure, is the *gukuna* ceremony, translated as "to make labia long". According to the limited information from the tradition<sup>33</sup>, experienced, older women used to accompany young girls in their passage into womanhood by spending time with them in the bush (traditionally they used a euphemism to keep the secret, so they say, that they "go to cut the broom" – "guca imyeyo"), teaching them about useful medicinal flora and sharing information about sexual and marital life.

One of the main components of *gukuna* ceremonies consisted in acquiring the practical knowledge of gently pulling or stretching and in this way elongating the lips of a girl's inner labia (*labia minora*) by means of herb balms to soften the skin.

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32 One of the many articles on this topic is: *Recovery After Genocide: Understanding the Dimensions of Recovery Capital Among Incarcerated Genocide Perpetrators in Rwanda*, [in:] *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16 April 2019, Sec. Psychology for Clinical Settings, Volume 10 – 2019 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00637>

33 Most of the information about *gukuna* – if not stated differently – was collected by myself during informal conversations with women I met in Kigali and Butare during my field research in November 2019.

This practice was intended to increase the surface of the inner lips of the vagina (called *imishino* in kinyarwanda), in order to heighten sexual sensation, stimulate the clitoris easily and in such a way attain *kunyaza* (“squirting ejaculation” described as “having more water when making sex”) – the sacred water that each woman has.

It is not difficult to guess that the Roman Catholic interpretation imposed by white missionaries (in colonial times, but very often also today) set *gukuna* tradition alongside sin and masturbation. Nevertheless today there are many voices that claim *gukuna* to be only a version of clitoridectomy, commonly known as female circumcision (although *gukuna* doesn’t implicate any surgery), which could also be explained by reference to traditional concepts of being a real woman and offering pleasure. Nowadays in Rwanda, among Rwandan minorities in Europe and online, there are many offers of workshops for young girls: for instance, the one proposed by Dative Makumana, an advocate of the *gukuna* tradition, which puts the weight on the practice of self-massage, which lasts four to six weeks of apprenticeship and costs around 150 euro.

However as far as the Rwandan point of view is concerned – especially the one seen as “traditional” and “ancient” – the meaning of *gukuna* was far more elaborate and multifaceted<sup>34</sup>. *Gukuna* refers to the expression, “make sure you are not naked”, or “take care of your body”: one becomes a woman by gradually “dressing” one’s genitals which – naturally naked – could be considered unacceptable, indecent, or even immoral. It is meaningful that fluids are highlighted not only by attaining the squirting orgasm and the inner sacred water but also by via the *gukuna* ceremony, where water (*amazi*), cow’s milk (*amata*), banana beer (*urugwagwa*) and honey (*ubuki*) are involved as symbolic links between nature and the social world<sup>35</sup>.

Water symbolism related to fecundity seemed to be extremely widespread in many realms of Rwandan social life.

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34 Some of my interlocutors noticed a big difference between the traditional approach to *gukuna* in the past and the contemporary, mostly commercialised version of it today, which may promote a conservative, patriarchal approach instead of enhancing sisterhood and female pleasure.

35 <https://www.amistades.info/post/il-gukuna-viaggio-tra-identit%C3%A0-e-ruoli-di-genere-nel-ruanda-contemporaneo>

“Since the birth, the metaphors connected with circulation and the blocking of vital processes assist the socio-cultural development of a person” writes the anthropologist Jean-Luc Galabert referring to pre-colonial tradition in Rwanda<sup>36</sup>. In many “opening” stages in Rwandan tradition – during moments that require fecundity and vital energy to develop – sexual intercourse between parents is expected to be accomplished. Likewise, when the child’s first tooth comes out, sex should occur, otherwise it was believed that the tooth could chop the kid and leave it breathless. The end of mourning or the moving into a new house can in addition be included among situations that required an inner push of fertile energy due to their initiatory character.

*Gukuna* could be seen as a symbolic, highly personal acknowledgment of the woman’s body made by women to women, for pleasure’s sake. It strengthens the bonds between women, makes them acquire self-confidence and power. However in its essence it also connects the inner flow of the woman’s body with a larger cosmos: water (lakes, landscape), history (myths, tradition), the outer world that requires her energy, and other women that need to feel connected. Last but not least – one can include here the community of men as well, who build their identity and find their social function as such by bringing pure pleasure to women. “Nowadays men keep drifting on the lake, day and night, looking for the origin of life”.

## **Closeness and female intimacy in form and content – a revolt in science, in life or both?**

What could be the conclusion of this text – the outcome of a flow of feelings and inspirations, an insight review of my personal relation to the body, about being a woman, and regarding my observations and act of listening during massage meetings, lectures, and field research experiences – both “at home” and in Rwanda?

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36

Jean-Luc Galabert, *Les enfants d’Imana : histoire sociale et culturelle du Rwanda ancien*, 2012, Izuba, Saint-Jean

Being a dedicated anthropologist whose paths only slightly and transiently crossed academic circles, I have always reflected on the extent (if at all) to which a researcher could embrace his – but *de facto* precisely HER – own personal experiences and vulnerable emotions, tender feelings, and floating identities in a “scientific” text. Is it actually ALLOWED to visualise in words the dynamics of the flow of inspirations and coincidences, so much embedded in everyday life? If so, who allows this? Why do I feel that a kind of approval is needed – seeing how poetry, art and thoughts can only be free like water?

One can say: no assumptions surge without reason... Going a step further, I will quote the straightforward Mona Chollet (called by some “the bright light of Francophone feminism”): “But is it possible [for women] to have desires that you can be sure belong to you, when you’ve been immersed all your life in a world ruled by male domination?<sup>37</sup>”. By bringing up Chollet, I will put a clear statement here: I would love to read and write texts that wouldn’t be necessarily defined as “feminist”, rather they are only written in an accessible style, where a personal, deeply female experience is freely mixed with an astute analysis of the culture that surrounds us in the here and now. I am yearning for literary works that surge from a tone of self-aware curiosity, that are tangible and rooted in personal experience, while being as inspiring as the books of Chollet. Her book *Defense of Witches*<sup>38</sup> resonated not only in France, it has helped to remove stigmas and male women feel recognised worldwide/in Poland as well. In *Le Monde*, the journalist Valentine Faure defined Chollet’s work as aimed at “personal political development: a liberating and encouraging revolt, but through changing oneself as much as through changing the world.”<sup>39</sup>

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37 Mona Chollet, *Wymyślić miłość na nowo. Jak patriarchy sabotuje relacje między mężczyznami a kobietami*, translated by Jacek Giszczak, 2022, *Karakter / Reinventing love. How the patriarchy sabotages heterosexual relationships?*

38 Mona Chollet, *In defence of witches. The Legacy of the Witch Hunts and Why Women Are Still on Trial*, St. Martin’s Press, 2022. Polish edition: *Czarownice. Niezwyciężona siła kobiet*, *Karakter*, translated by Sławomir Królak, 2019

39 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/08/books/review/mona-chollet-in-defense-of-witches.html>



While preparing myself to write these lines, I have just completed a massage of one of my regularly visiting female friends – we are continuously deeply moved and overwhelmed by the metamorphosis that the body both reflects and implicates. It is evident that the quality of our conversation and sharing becomes more authentic, from the heart/gut – personal and intimate.

The conclusion of this essay can be as follows: we should demarginalise and encourage the creation of personal texts that surge straight from a conscious and feeling body. We should not be “afraid” of incongruencies, divergencies, the fusion of topics and contexts, or emotional and intimate digressions. Furthermore we should celebrate coincidences and follow the flow of inspirations, meetings, lectures – as they come.

## **PS**

For those who still feel deeply in their bodies (I recommend you to search deeper though...), having an attachment, more or less consciously, to the archetypal vision of a straightforward “scientific conclusion” (even if we started from the point of giving freedom of expression and release a personal, open, boundless form for our thoughts...) here you are! In today’s anthropology, it would be old-fashioned and even quite colonial not to give priority to an indigenous form of communication and innovative ways of looking. That is why I would love to refer to the traditional way of the completion of the weaving of a rug in the Navajo tradition: weavers sometimes leave one loose thread in their work as a means for their soul to escape. As in body work, it is the quality and the consciousness (the soul in fact) that one is putting into their work that counts and gives light to the work. I ask you, let a Navajo rug, a body-conscious knowledge and this text stay unfinished (one would claim) or in other words – be open to an undefined, previously non-revealed, unnamed inspiration. And let it open to a further flow – it doesn’t matter in what river.

I will keep on repeating in many ways:

Let the poetry flow!

Let the body talk!

Don’t stop the water!

## APPENDIX

\*By the way: as my partner (Polish with Nigerian roots) is moving right now into my apartment, all my Africa-related books have to find their place in the room dedicated to massage meetings, to make more space for his things. Maybe the books will influence the receivers' sensations and inspire them somehow. Does it mean that my partner and I are in a dynamic of initiation and we should help the energy flow by immersing ourselves in our bodies and intimacy?

Is it just a coincidence and blending of topics?

Or is it exactly THE fluid dimension of a more feminine realm that I am looking for?

I will come back to listening to my body, which says: Let it flow and continue falling!

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**At least there,  
behind four  
walls, and away  
from people's  
watchful and  
expectant  
eyes, I can be  
human again**

# Spiritually Yoked

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus!” I mutter. My fingers feeling for the next bead on the rosary, my right hand clenching it.

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son...” I continue the prayer, as a voice flows over the intercom announcing my delayed flight.

My ingenious plan is going down the drain.

I made sure to take the 12:50 flight from Lusaka, despite it being the most expensive. My intention was simple: fly into O.R Tambo with just enough time for airport formalities before connecting to Heathrow. This has become my annual routine when I travel to be with my sister Maria, and her family for the holidays.

However, today feels different. Sitting next to the window on the flight from Zambia today, I saw far too many birds flapping around the plane as if in confusion, or migration. The hair on my skin stood on edge for a while. I had a vague memory of something similar. I cannot remember where or when. What I do remember of my life is tucked neatly into the last thirty years of convent life. Ironically, it is my life as a nun with its strict adherence to schedule which makes the just announced flight delay unbearable. That of course plus eight more hours in my not-so-comfortable habit.

So lost in my thoughts I am, that at first I do not notice the man who has drawn near asking for prayer. My attire betrays me as always but I ignore him. Would he act the same if I wore jeans and a t-shirt? It amuses me how everyone associates a nun with a habit-clad individual, never without. Yet behind the habit is a soul with real feelings. A soul who at this moment feels the privacy of her room beckoning her. At least there, behind four walls, and away from people’s watchful and

expectant eyes, I can be human again: habit off, legs stretched – lounging.

Tempted by the thought, I suddenly feel hot. Trapped. I wish I could take my clothes off.

“The menopausal hot flashes will come upon you without warning”, the gynaecologist had warned. I try to move my legs apart to allow some air in . I can feel the stickiness between my thighs and armpits where the fabric is wet with trapped sweat. It brushes against my skin. I catch myself smiling as I imagine how the faces around me would react if I dared to open my buttons.

I am almost laughing out loud now, because I think that the white lady with the green eyes would be the most horrified. I had seen how she had looked at the girl with the protruding breasts. The black lady to my left with carefully laid make-up, long lashes and Gucci sunglasses would most certainly urge me on. She has a “life begins at 40” vibe about her. I look away when she raises her head slightly to rid her face of some of the twenty-inch Brazilian hair that has strayed. The teenager across the room would probably not notice! At sixteen or seventeen years old she is too lost in the music coming from the bright pink earphones on her head, her knee-high boots tapping off to what I assume is the music. And perhaps the man who sits with a notepad jotting things down is a journalist and tomorrow’s headline will read: “BAD HABITS: HABITLESS NUN SPOTTED IN DEPARTURE LOUNGE.” I laugh into my scone, a little bit goes the wrong way and so I pretend to cough.

Shaking the crumbs off my chest, my laughter leaves me fast. Truth be told, it isn’t so much the impossibility of exposing my face, or my hair, but more about the weight I have gained over time. I no longer love travelling because I can hardly walk. I have earned myself a slight limp. Or perhaps it is age catching up with me? I look down at the white spots on my arms and the back of my hands. I hear that white spots are more common in fairer-skinned people like me. It’s genetic, they say. But I do know that they are more ferocious as you grow older.

“The 12.50 flight to Heathrow is delayed for at least another hour. Do not leave your baggage unattended.”

I once again shift just a little bit more in my seat and lift my arms inconspicuously to let some more air in as I continue exploring my environment.

I look at the stand with sweets and soft drinks arranged in between giraffe and elephant carvings. When I was younger, this inconvenience would have been a chance to window-shop the designer stores upstairs. To admire all the things I would never buy.

In those days, it was not only the nshima that added a few kilograms to my bones, but the chocolates, coke, biscuits, crisps and other goodies I snacked on after lights-out while torch-reading my romantic novels in bed. Rows of religious books on different subjects sat on the bookshelf in the wall.

As long as it escaped Mother Superior's watchful eye, my secret was safe with Sr. Mwango.

"Sister!", I would throw a pillow to catch her attention. And she would wink, knowingly.

There was something in those lusty images that pumped adrenalin through my body, fuelling the nightly mischief over and over again. When I read those books, it was Chizu and I all over again – two uncaring souls lost in an adulterous frenzy. I mean, forgive me Father, but there had to be something to break the monotony of convent life: morning mass, chores, lunch, siesta, evening prayers, supper, bedtime.

For me it was the snacks, and of course the forbidden novels. Every month, we put our income together in the convent. From the budget made with the other nuns, I got pocket money to restock my snacks. And promptly each month, I received an even bigger box of chocolates and other goodies from Maria in London. I guess I was being rewarded for the one thing I had done right.

You see, if you had known me as a young girl, you would think that I would never have become a nun. There had always been this feeling of a fire shut up in my bones which burst whenever I thought about my future. "Mulenga! You are destined for greatness", I would say to myself each time I got the chance to look at myself in the mirror.

There it is again! The weird fluttering from the flight. This time I'm forced further into my thoughts because a small car with sirens and lights cruises towards the boarding gates without warning. It jolts my memory violently, and the eerie sound of the mine alarm breaking the silence of early dawn in Roan Township, when I was just a little girl comes to me.

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It was the first time it sounded since I'd moved to the Copperbelt mining town of Luanshya. I dislodged the metal rods we placed across the door for security, and a significant crowd gathered in the street.

"What's going on?", I heard Bwalya's mother say. She lived at the corner to our right.

"Oh my! Mayooo! Umupamba! Umupamba!", an older woman exclaimed, raising her hands in the air. "The alarm doesn't just go off."

"True!" Tumelo, the guard who manned the mine police post at the end of the street said. He looked like he had something else to say, but we were all silenced by the voice shouting over his radio messenger:

"Tailing dam collapse near shaft one...over...possible sinkhole....fast moving mud.....over.....main shaft isolated.....emergency evac needed...over."

"Mayoooo! Mwe Lesa!", Bwalya's mother cried, throwing herself to the ground! "Bashi Bwalya is working the night shift! Mayooo! Mayooo! Mayooo!", She screamed, and began to run towards the mining plant with only a chitenge wrapped around her body.

Others followed her, and suddenly a pattering of tens of feet headed towards the mining plant. Fear, or worry, or both, must have gripped me, for I stood transfixed in the same spot that I had been when I joined the group earlier. Cold sweat ran down my spine making me shudder despite the relatively warm morning. I dragged myself back to the house. I needed to go back to sleep because I had to deliver jerseys to the muzungu lady in town later that morning. And all the while, I could not get rid of the fear I felt. Why was I scared?

I quickly peed in the small toilet behind our house, and went back to bed. I snuggled as hard and deep as I could in my not-so-warm bed, and made a mental note to find a way of buying an extra blanket. I had long since reconciled myself to the fact that my husband would probably never buy a blanket for a bed he rarely slept in. I had no idea when he would come home. You see, the man disappeared every pay day, for days,



till almost all his money was done. So yes, I was scared, but certainly not for him.

In fact, just the day before, I had gotten a visit from one of the strange women who frequented Section Three. You could not have missed the signature bright red lipstick and gekko skin that looked like the whole Ambi factory had been emptied on it:

“Good morning, Madam”, She greeted me. Anthill-coloured cake covered her face, several shades lighter than her skin, cracking at the movement of her lips. I mused at how she could muster such respect when her short tight skirt would reveal her buttocks at the slightest attempt to bend. Tear at the sudden movement of her legs.

“I have come to collect the 20 Kwacha your husband owes me for some goods he got on credit”, she said.

“I have no idea what you are talking about! Come back when my husband is around”, I responded, conscious of the dismay on my face.

“Ok! I will be back”, she said without losing her cool.

She turned to leave as I stared after her in disgust, well aware that she, or another, would be back the following month’s end if my husband did not settle the debt. The idea was to torment us wives enough to get our husband’s attention – attention that would never reach mine, because he and I rarely talked. Do not get me wrong or judge me! I was a good wife, at least from the point of view of wifely duties. I still cooked, washed, ironed, and prepared his bath water when he needed it. I did not deny his conjugal right. I tolerated his mostly drunken state. Daily, he patronised the neighbours, and drank the cheap local brew – “seven days” it was called in relation to the number of days it took to brew to its full potency. On several nights his friends carried him home, barely making it to the bed, where he slept like a log. Sometimes he was so drunk, I woke up drenched in the warmth of his urine.

But I still cleaned after him, like magic.

And in his magic state of awareness each morning, incessant questions and orders followed:

“Is my nshima and kapenta ready?”

“Warm my bath water!”

“Do not forget to clean my boots!”

“Iron my green shirt!”

And after he bathed, he could very well wear the black one. One time, I almost burned the famous green shirt because I got lost imagining what would happen if I hit him across the face with the hot pressing iron. Would he scream? Would he grovel...? I gasped midway into my thoughts, horrified by the black mark that formed on the back of his shirt. Holding it behind me, I smiled as he left.

“I will pass through Mwenya’s place after work!”

This was his parting phrase before rushing to catch the 6am mine bus at the Hospital pick-up point. I muttered acknowledgement under my breath, knowing how the day would end. Only on pay day did he awake early, sober enough to whistle his jolly way to the payline. On such days he told me stories about our neighbours: “Bashi Bwalya has no idea that all those children are not his”. “Imagine, Tumelo, uses charms to stay awake during the night shift”, he would say, laughing heartily, and his rare display of playfulness would make me join in...

Often, he bought a few house essentials without any input from me. I guess I was too young to run the house, yet old enough to be his wife. Taking advantage of the rare good mood, I once told him that he could give me money to buy groceries like the other miners’ did for their wives.

Ah! His mood changed instantly. He cleared the lunch table with the back of his hand, plates flying in all directions, the mbakuli with nshima falling face down on the floor. Metal shattered against concrete.

“Are you saying I do not provide for you?”

“I-I-I-was just saying...” I cowered.

“Saying what?”, he raised his hand. I covered my face and braced myself. But he left the room and slammed the door.

Later, I found him with his face in his hands behind the house. He quickly wiped his eyes when he saw me. He was kind for a few days after that, but later he succumbed to his monthly wanderlust. Returning to hide whatever little was left of his money in the back of our black and white television. How quickly his emotions changed. I simply did not understand.

However, maybe I should mention that ours was more of a father-daughter arrangement than a romance, you see.

I vividly remember the day my mother called me into her hut and informed me that my “husband” had sent money

for me to join him on the Copperbelt where he was working. I smiled inside, engrossed in the fantasy of the city we heard so much about. Day and night, I dreamt about automobiles and electricity-lit nights, and imagined how it must be to not worry about running out of kerosene for our lamps at night. You should have seen how puffed up I looked with my chin held high, eyes fixed on some imaginary spot somewhere in the distance, the day I finally left the village. I knew from the envious stares from my peers and their parents that they all wished it was their families and not mine who would be receiving frequent gifts and visits from their city-dwelling in-law.

On that miraculous day, I got a lift on a lorry transporting fish from Mpulungu to Lusaka, and I was so excited that I did not notice the stench of *buka-buka* fish in the back where I sat. The exhilaration when I got on the train in Lusaka for the first time was unimaginable. I watched everything around me in silence. I sat still like a prairie dog, internalising the sounds of Zambia Railways locomotive 204 when it pulled out of Kamwala station.

Chooooo-chooo! Chooo-chooo! chooo-choooo!

Fwheeeooooo!

Guards stomped the platform in quick succession. Adrenaline rushed down my spine in rhythm with the *chuuuuuuuug – chuuuuuuuuug, chuuug-chuuug* and then *chug-chug-chug-chug-chug-chug* as the locomotive's pistons responded to the coal that I had just heard being shovelled into the furnace.

The other passengers, mostly young men going to work on the mines, seemed to share my excitement. It was 1970 after all, President Kaunda had recently announced the nationalisation of the mines two years prior, and all roads led to the mining towns, which I later realised had an aura of the American dream for the newly independent Zambia. I know the term could not have been apparent then but one thing was clear: the mines promised better lives, prosperity and upward social mobility for those that worked hard. And so the young men sang their hearts out in solidarity:

“Tiyende pamodzi ndi mutima umo” (Let's move together with one heart), the song reverberated all the way to Luanshya.

Like me, passengers seemed undisturbed by the fact that third class, where we sat, was nearer to the noise, the heat, and smoke from the boiler. So bad it was, that each time you pushed your head out of the window to see where you were going, black soot stung your eyes and painted your face. I didn't care, I had a permanent grin that broke only long enough to nibble at the chinyonge (dry *buka* fish) nestled in my lap.

My father's telegram must have been sufficiently descriptive, because my husband waved at me as soon as I stepped onto the train platform in my new floral viscose dress. My hair was plaited nicely, freshly, and black Maliposas shined on my feet. I recognised him from the photograph he'd sent. When I saw the man in a floral James Brown shirt, crossbands and hat approaching me, I dropped to my knees and bowed my head as I had been instructed.

"How are you, my father?"

"Fine." He answered simply, and gestured for me to hand over my bundle.

He started walking towards a nearby kiosk and by the time my little legs caught up with him, he had already bought two bottles of Tarino and set them down on one of the tables. I pulled a chair closest to the place where he had put the second drink before he sat down across the table to drink his. Five to ten minutes went by before the twenty-three year age gap between us became apparent in the things we did not say. I kept myself busy by staring at the tiny bubbles that formed in the soft-drink bottle. I put it down after taking a sip. And each time I lifted the bottle, I caught a glimpse of the face of the man before me. He had three permanent lines on his forehead, and one of his eyebrows was always raised in astonishment. I had trouble deciding whether he was looking at me or not. I stifled a giggle and almost choked when I remembered the name my mother had for squint-eyed people like him – *fulubulu*. Believe me, it had no direct relation to a squinting eye. My husband got up to leave as soon as I took my last sip, and started walking without inviting me. I got up and followed him, as a child would its father, and we journeyed the four kilometres to the mining compound on foot.

We went through a street lined with Poinsettia trees, red and in full bloom. They smelled sweet. The houses we passed had neatly manicured lantana and hibiscus fences with matching

neat lawns. I stopped admiringly at one of the gates where I saw a group of white children playing dress up and fashion parade. Across the street, two black boys – barefooted and wearing matching faded tennis shorts, scavenged a bin outside one of the gates. They looked about ten, twins in fact, except that the one with a much newer red patch sewed into his old shorts carried himself with an air of authority. The boys began to fight over something they'd found. The lid of the bin hit the pavement, and the crushing sound of metal-to-concrete shook the silent street.

An Indian man came rushing out of the house, waving a baseball bat, "Hey! You silly boys! Stop what you're doing!" Three vicious dogs barked behind him, bounding towards the gate, and the boys scampered with their prizes from the bin. Their screams disappeared as they reached the end of the street.

I stretched for my husband, terrified, "Ba Tata, wait for me!" But he had already reached the point where the boys had just vanished. I screamed, as I trotted to catch up. My heart was still pounding. Our dogs back in the village were way friendlier.

We joined the main road, but soon diverted, entering a man-made path that cut through an empty piece of land, marking the boundary between town and the mining area. We rejoined the tarred road about 100m later, where the road curved downhill and I could see a huge yard full of strange looking buildings in the valley to the west. It took my breath away, and I had to pause to catch it. My husband, noticing the sudden stop, was kind enough to note: "That is the mining plant where I work. And those are the miners' houses", he pointed to the rows and rows of asbestos roofs that marked the mining compound on the ridge, a few metres to the east.

The air around us grew thicker and cloudier, and I could feel an irritating itchiness on my throat. I cleared it and spat out a little phlegm.

I soon understood why. A large amount of smoke was coming out of a huge chimney in the middle of the mining plant – maybe that's why the locals called it *sentā*. I later learnt that it was released every day at the same time, and as if by design the wind always blew it towards the mining compound. We continued to walk, and the stream that crossed the road at the lowest part of the valley came upon me suddenly because I had not been warned by the tall foliage that always signalled

a nearby river back home. In fact, the area around the stream was so clear, you could see the pebbles and white sand that formed the river bed. And even more shocking, there was not a single living organism noticeable in the water.

Finally we reached the township, and joyful screaming greeted us. Dust rose from children who formed a ring, making fast movements to the right and then to the left singing:

“Ma chain, Ma chain  
Waya waya;  
Ma chain, Ma chain  
Waya waya;  
Uwaputula ewafuma ko,  
Uwaputula ewafuma ko...”

They went on and on, starting over each time someone broke the chain and left the ring. How I longed to join in. But I followed my husband until we arrived at house number 210/3. My new home.

My hopes of a glamorous life in town were soon shattered when the reality of marriage struck me. A simple act like opening the tap, and watching the ease with which it gave water, evoked a deep longing for the stories and giggles on the way to the well in our village.

Many a time I felt myself slipping out of my body and into near oblivion. I had no idea who I was. I craved attention and assurance from anyone –especially my husband. There were days when I cried myself to sleep. I missed my family and friends.

Other times, I told myself that I was old enough to face the world. I looked forward to DOME: domestic clubs for miners’ wives. I attended not only because it had the communal feel of home, but it made me feel assertive and brought out the dream I had to make something of myself here in the city. It was at DOME that I learnt how to knit and earn myself a little bit of money from selling jerseys and baby layettes – booties, hats and shawls.

However, DOME was only twice a week.

Until there was Chizu.

Chizu’s elder brother worked with my husband in the mines. My husband called on him to do odd jobs and escort me to the fields we cultivated, a few kilometres from the mining compound. There, the soil was more fertile. Chizu and I, united

in age and nostalgia for the village, began to spend more time together, even in the absence of my husband and his brother. The day visits extended to those nights when my husband was either out drinking or on night shift, and my friend would always creep back to his brother's house before my husband got back. A few times, we mustered enough courage to steal from my husband's stash behind the television, and attend the monthly ballroom dance competitions at Chaisa Hall. I never found out if my husband knew about the money, or the affair, but he was often too drunk to suspect anything, even when he found us chatting.

Underground mining does that to people. How many miners did I know in our area that did not drink? Myth holds that a man loses part of his soul the moment he steps beneath the earth's surface. As our men bore the earth away, angry earth spirits ate at their lungs till there was nothing left. If alcohol wouldn't do it, mother nature would.

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I stirred from my sleep about four hours after the mine alarm had gone off. Of course my husband hadn't come home. It was probably another drunken night out. I warmed my bath water on the two-plate cooker in the small kitchen, and took a bath behind the house. Slapping lotion onto my body, I dressed up in a hurry because I didn't want to be late for the jersey delivery. I put my metal comb on a hot plate and massaged a generous amount of petroleum jelly into my hair which I had parted in three. The smell of burning hair filled the room, so I opened the door and window. The furniture and clothes should not catch the smell. My clothes should not catch the smell.

"Ouch!", I screamed, sucking my thumb which I burned, reaching for the hair at the back of my head. I heated the comb three more times before I was convinced that my hair was stretched enough. I needed to make a good impression.

I ate my cocoa and *kampompo* (big buns that got their name from helmets/*kampompo*, either because they were shaped like one, or because they are distributed to miners, I can't remember). I then took the now familiar route to town –downhill, uphill, passed the bend in the road and through the street lined with poinsettia trees. The clear stream had turned into a

thick brownish-red that boiled and bubbled a life of its own. My attention turned to the black slug mountains on the right side of the road. In my rush, I had forgotten to turn on the radio or ask anyone how the miners were doing. I had not seen Bwalya's mother either. I made a note to check on her when I returned.

I shivered in spite of the warm weather and the ten knitted jerseys on my back. I continued walking.

I stood at Old Theo's pub, opposite zCBC to deliver the jerseys. Apparently, the *muzungu* couple owned the place. Rumour had it that they came to Luanshya from a refugee camp near Bwana Mkubwa in Kitwe. But I knew that must be a lie, because muzungus are the rulers, never the slaves. I had also heard some people call them Polishi – to us every muzungu was a muzungu. The wife had become interested in my work after she saw a jersey I had made for my friend Nayame, who was a waitress at the pub. I crossed the road, and Nayame appeared.

"Hey!", she shouted. Ringing a dishcloth and then waving with it. "How are you doing?" she asked more quietly as I reached her.

"Not so fine. You know your brother-in-law, he will never stop his bad habits. He has not shown up since Friday."

"Three whole days? He needs to change! Why is it so difficult for him?", she asked, releasing the bundle from my back. "Anyway, let's go inside, Mrs Anielewicz wants to meet you."

Inside, Mrs Anielewicz smiled heartily when we walked into the dimly lit room. I was relieved, but only for a short while. Her eyes turned sad suddenly, cool like glass, staring beyond my own. I shifted my weight from one leg to another. I even turned to pull out a pink jersey, but she would not stop. I looked around the room. There were old photographs, almost paintings of people from a very long time ago. A lot of lace hung off the tables, and she had cakes with jam in the middle. Candles burned in the daytime.

"Please forgive me for staring at you like this. But I see a big, big potential when I look at you. A very big star. But the first part of your life is not so easy. You have to prepare your heart."

Of course life was not easy.

"If you could make a wish and you knew it would come true, would you?", she asked. Still looking at me with those grey eyes.



Of course I would. What would it be? I wanted to know how you say in Polishi, *I wish my husband were dead*. But I said, “I wish to have a nice house like the ones in the white areas.”

She laughed. “You must believe. The universe will answer you, and give you what you need. Just make a wish.”

And so I did. I wished to be free of my husband.

Mrs Anielewicz continued talking to me, “Drink your tea, then you can go. I’ll make another order next week.”

Out of earshot, I asked Nayame, “Iwe! What is wrong with your madam?”

“She sees in the spirit,” she was laughing, “You must be very special for her to tell you. She only tells the other *muzungus*.”

We both laughed.

Her supervisor was glaring at her, an obvious sign that she needed to get back to work.

“I will see you in the evening when I bring your payment.” We hugged, and I felt warm and grateful for her. I imagined what I would do with my new money. Maybe I would be able to buy my own blanket after all. And later my own shoes. My own food. Or I could share it with Chizu.

On my way back home, I passed the brownish red stream and closed my eyes to the black slur mountains. This time I spat on the ground, stepped on the spittle, determined not to look back.

I took a shortcut through a house on the first street that shared its back with ours. At least then I did not have to go the full stretch of the street and then upwards and into our street to get home. Nolani, who lived there, saw me walking the path we had created by parting the hedge that marked the boundary between our two houses.

“Relative!”, she called shrilly, in the usual way we addressed each other. Our tribes, Mambwe and Tumbuka, had close dialects.

“Yes, relative!”, I responded, waiting for her to ask for some item which she always claimed to have forgotten to buy. Yesterday it was toothpaste and I had to squeeze some onto a paper for her. I was always doing this, despite my husband being a mere dump truck operator, and hers an entire shift boss.

“People have died, I tell you!”, came the unexpected answer.

“Died where?”, I responded.

“How have you not heard? Aren’t you looking for your husband? I hear there are still a lot of people trapped in the mine, let’s go and see what is happening!” she suggested.

Reluctant, or maybe ignoring the slight nausea I felt, I told her I would go with her after I cooked lunch, just in case my husband showed up.

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Around 2pm we joined the traffic going steadily back and forth from the mining plant to the compound. Every street we passed from section one to three had at least one house with a funeral tent or chairs outside. My body began to feel light.

Some children sang and played: “Ma chain, Ma chain waya, waya...”. But today the song did not have its joyful ring. Instead, the song was slower, lower, and the children looked away each time I tried to smile at them. They did not smile back. For children that had just lost a father in the accident, the cord between them and the mine was now severed – gone forever like the broken chains when one of them left the game.

I was not prepared for the sight that met my eyes after we made our way through the thicket of people gathered at the accident site. A large, gaping hole stood in the place where the tailing dam had collapsed, creating a sink-hole, and the area around it was now barricaded by red and white tape. Fear and dread was evident in the eyes of family and friends who were sprawled all over the lawns. The air was heavy with the stench of death, coupled with the wailing of sirens and family. Rescue workers from Nkana, Nchanga and Mufulira mines trekked in and out of the mining cage, and each time they emerged, the announced number of dead bodies increased. And so did the stretchers and ambulances which left the scene at top speed with bright red whirling sirens.

Bwalya’s mother (from the corner) was pacing up and down when we managed to locate her. It was clear from her swollen eyes, dry lips and uncombed hair, that she had not gone back home from the time she left us at three in the morning. She was still barefoot, her chitenge slipping off.

“People of God! Bwalya’s father has not been found!” she said, trying hard to hold back the tears.

“What have the rescuers been doing the whole day? Nolani blurted out.

Bwalya’s mother sniffed, “They told us that they are trying hard to get to the main shaft where ninety miners have been trapped by the mud blocking the entrance.”

“But how does one know if their husband is still underground or not? Where can I check, Aunty?” Fear began to grip me for the first time. Could my husband be one of the trapped men? Yes, there were many times I dreamt about this world without him. But not like this. Not now. Not yet.

“Do you see that building?” She pointed to the central administration where the miners reported for duty. “If your husband’s identity card is still hanging on the wall there, then he is most likely underground. Each time the rescue workers come up, a head count is done and the identity cards of the dead and the injured are removed from the wall.”

I was still staring at the building when I saw Chizu checking through the identity cards. I walked to him slowly. When I got there, I watched his fingers checking through carefully. He looked at me, and pulled at my husband’s tag. I wanted to ask him if his brother’s was there too, but we said nothing.

Suddenly, everyone heaved forward in anticipation. The sound of a cage making its way to the surface pulled all of us towards it. Bwalya’s mother stopped talking in the near distance, and we all looked in the direction of the mine shaft. A ragged man was the first to step out of the cage. It was Bwalya’s father! He took a few steps forward and stopped, lifting his arms first, and then his head, muttering something to himself. He turned as if to go back to the shaft, and then he turned back and saw his wife for the first time. She stood transfixed behind the barricade, hands over her mouth, tears streaming down her chubby cheeks.

“Oh my God, Bana Bwalya, I am alive!”, he squeezed his own arms, shaking his legs and hands as though to make sure. “The tentacles of death missed me by so!”, he pinched his small finger. “We had to run from mud which followed closely behind, filling up the shaft...”, he ran out of breath. The paramedics whisked him away, towards an open ambulance.

I do not know exactly what made my eyes wander in the direction of the bodies that had just been laid on the ground. But

a familiar green shirt caught my eye. I looked over at Chizu, but he would not look at me. I started moving closer to it, my hands shaking wildly, my body flashing hot and cold. Lying face down, crumpled and lifeless, I did not miss the mark of my pressing iron on the bottom right of his shirt, because I had received a sound beating over it. Chizu was standing across from me, still searching among the bodies for his brother. He stood up straight, and our eyes met, finally. Guilt and fear flowed between us in equal parts. Loud mourning from families of the recently brought-up deceased filled the air, and I watched him join in. For me, both men died that day. I tried to shed a tear, but no matter how much I blinked, rubbed, or pressed my eyes, I could not.

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I have not thought about my childhood or lack of it in a long time, but thinking about it now makes me realise that I may have found myself on the Copperbelt just so that Maria would have the life she had today. I bless the day my mother insisted that she remain with me.

“My daughter! Our home is far from here”, she had said, during a visit from the village. “You are clearly more depressed and lonely than you are letting on.” Her instinct spoke, for I did not look depressed or lonely.

She clasped her hands, “Since you have no intention of getting married again, allow me to leave you with Maria. She is like a daughter to you. You have to place that love somewhere.” I had to agree that with the fifteen years between us, Maria being the youngest of our family of ten, she was indeed as good as my daughter.

I was fortunate to be employed as an instructor at DOME, where I taught miner’s wives to knit. Although I had no formal training, Mrs Anielewicz, whose family I had continued making jerseys for, had recommended me to the mine manager, one of her regular patrons. Nolani was kind enough to add a character reference letter from her husband. Her’s was one of the few who had not been on shift that fateful night.

I registered Maria as my dependent. She attended the mine primary school where she excelled exceptionally, and went to Mpelembe Secondary School, reserved for the best pupils

from all Copperbelt mine schools. Having emerged as the best student at grade 12, Maria became one of the people zccm sponsored to study in the United Kingdom. She never came back to Zambia because she fell in love and married a British man.

It's time to board the flight now, but I want to buy one more novel, eat one more scone. Yet it's too much of a strain to stand up and walk around. And it is still hot. I feel tired. Every time I read those romantic novels, it is Chizu and I in those pages all over again. It is my own way of mourning. I wonder where he could be now.

When my husband died, I truly felt I had murdered him by thought. What if I hadn't made that wish, would he still be here? When Maria left, I thought one good deed could counter a bad one. But when she was gone, my heart began to collapse into a dark hole again, and I thought, maybe, just maybe, in the Sisterhood, I would find some kind of penance.

Buckling my seat and looking out of the window, I remember the confused birds from earlier in the day. But this time I watch them fly in a straight arrow, writing something neatly in the air.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

**Experiencing  
something in  
darkness can  
be chaotic**

SUZYIKA NYIMBILI

# The place of theatre as a medium of memory

*Insights from Zambia and Hungary*

## **Introduction**

Playwrights and theatremakers aim to create performances that resonate with diverse audiences. To create such performances, it is imperative to expose oneself to performances in different settings, beyond one's confinement or region. In my theatre-making experience, I have come to appreciate that despite the different contexts and locations under which theatremakers operate, they are connected through the art of storytelling. Despite the structural borders, walls, and limitations that exist, there is much closeness and uniqueness in what we make: theatre. In my interactions with theatremakers in different locations, be it in Lusaka or Harare, Vienna or Budapest, Austin or Atlanta, online or in person, there is much that connects theatremakers, the desire and passion for storytelling through theatre. The call for deconfining the work of creatives, including theatre makers, is, therefore, a call that is at the centre of the very work of creatives. Creatives are not meant to be confined unless its part of their creative aim. "The theatre", as a space of performance, and "theatre" as performance, not only bring performers and audiences together, but theatre is also a language that has the potential to bridge the gaps that exist among different settings and remind us of our closeness.

In this paper, I share my experience and understanding of closeness and proximity through theatre. Using examples of two stage plays from Hungary and Zambia, I argue that theatre, defined in this paper as “anything performed by live humans that incorporates language in front of a live audience”,<sup>40</sup> is a medium of memory and is a vital tool for interpreting and researching memories. The two plays discussed in this paper, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, my own creation and *Ghetto Sheriff*, a creation of theatre artists in Budapest, Hungary, give insights into deconfining the interpretation of theatre performances and how theatre is a medium of memory applicable in both Africa and Europe and other settings. As a theatre-maker interested in making memory plays, I consider theatre to be a medium of memory when it is used to invoke and question memory and to remind people of the past. Additionally, plays can be used as records for the future, thereby, helping society remember.

This paper utilises Stuart Spencer’s<sup>41</sup> spectrum on storytelling to explain the effects of theatre on audiences which justifies the uniqueness of theatre in invoking and questioning memory. Spencer asserts that while films invoke feelings and emotions immediately (visceral response), and prose is contemplative and analytical, theatre combines the effects of film and prose, making it well-suited to getting a message across to an audience.

In the next section, I will address the concept of understanding and experiencing theatre by using two examples of stage plays, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, and *Ghetto Sheriff*. Following the discussion of the two plays, I will bring in Spencer’s spectrum of storytelling and the place of theatre before concluding.

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40 Stuart Spencer, *The Playwright’s Guidebook: An Insightful Primer on the Art of Dramatic Writing*, First Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

41 Spencer Stuart is a playwright and author. <https://www.sarahlawrence.edu/faculty/spencer-stuart.html>



# Experience and understanding through theatre

The two plays, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* and *Ghetto Sheriff*, are plays I have experienced and find appropriate for use in this discussion. As a playwright, I am constantly aware that performance is not only a concept that ends on a stage or in a play, rather it extends into people's daily lives. This awareness helps me learn from day-to-day activities that people might not necessarily see as acts of performance. Such day-to-day activities may include how one walks, how politicians talk to the electorate, and how a Zambian man behaves in the presence of his in-laws. One of Shakespeare's most famous lines is "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players" from the play, *As You Like It*.<sup>42</sup> Much as it is "just" a line in a play, it has implications for understanding what goes on around us. The statement is a reminder of the constant performing nature of human beings. Whether in a play or not, there is a level of performativity in what humans do, and as noted by Shakespeare, we are all players for all our lives. Being on stage or in a play, is an extension of this performance nature of society, which justifies the argument that we can learn much from theatrical performances. I start the discussion with the play which I wrote and performed in, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*.

## Lenshina: The Bloody Truth

Since history is a mode of remembering, historical plays are a way of remembering the past and, hence, part of memory.<sup>43</sup> The play *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* has been performed three times in Zambia. The first version of the play, performed on September 27 2016, was titled *Lenshina: The Uprising*. In 2017, the play was renamed to *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, because "The Uprising" indirectly implied the Lumpa Church had risen against the

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42 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York, N.Y.: Washington Square Press, 1997), 83.

43 A. Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Springer, 2016).

state and, therefore, had “deserved” what happened to them. The usage of the words “The Uprising” aligned with the institutionalised memory of the conflict. Aside from the title change, the play increased its length by twenty minutes and gave more background to the conflict. The play attempts to tell the story of the conflict between the African indigenous Lumpa Church and the colonial government working together with the nationalist party, the United National Independence Party, before Zambia’s independence in 1964. The conflict is believed to have led to the deaths of over 1,000 people, while many more were forced to flee their homes.<sup>44</sup>

It is still the case that there are different interpretations of what the Lumpa church stood for and what led to so death of so many people due to the conflict. There is the established history following a commission of inquiry into what led to the conflict, which asserts that the conflict arose due to the need by the government to stop a rebellion against authority which can be dated back to the early 1950s. An interpretation of this conflict and memory after 1991 emerged which sees the Lumpa disturbances of 1964 as more of a massacre than a rebellion against authority.<sup>45</sup> This post-1991 interpretation emerged after a new neo-liberal-oriented regime came to power, exiled members of the Lumpa Church started to return to Zambia, and more open access to information and freedom of expression came into being. However, the old narrative of the fanatical Lumpa church persists as a collective memory.<sup>46</sup> The play, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, used theatre to create discussion and debate, and question this collective memory. The play attempts to reconstruct the memory of the Lumpa disturbances of 1964. Aside from using theatre for reconstructing the past, it can be used to reconfigure current happenings in order to construct memories directed toward the future. Therefore, the need for reconstructing memories does not end at merely reminding people about what happened in the past but also involves the need to seek a different future, dependent on the context and the need to carry out that which ought to be done.

44 David M. Gordon, “Rebellion Or Massacre? The UNIP-Lumpa Conflict Revisited,” in *One Zambia, Many Histories* (Brill, 2008), 45–76.

45 Gordon. Rebellion or Massacre?

46 Suzyika Nyimbili, “Lenshina: The Bloody Truth” (The Hub Theatre Zambia, 2016).

The play, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, uses theatre to highlight the different ways people remember the conflict and why it is remembered that way. As a piece of historical and memory theatre, it shares both the established historical account and the post-1991 views that challenge the established historical account of the conflict. The goal is to allow the audience to receive arguments from both sides in order to challenge their own memory about what had led to the death of people during the so-called “Lumpa disturbances”.

Since memory, as a concept, can refer to how something is remembered, theatre can be a means of remembering.<sup>47</sup> As individuals, communities and societies remember, that which is transmitted about the past is not a faithful transcription of that past but rather takes the form of continuous reading and interpretation.<sup>48</sup> As a consequence, theatre can be a tool that can be used to interpret memory. *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* questions the existing narrative about the question of who the members of the Lumpa church were, and how they lived. The play tries to bring to the picture a suppressed view and, thus, attempts to create a new memory by questioning an institutionalised memory.

Since history, like memory, cannot be taken as simply innocent activities of making a record of the past, it requires interpretation. Additionally, not only does history go through interpretation, but it also goes through selection and even distortion.<sup>49</sup> The case of the Lumpa disturbances has distortions that exist until now, and theatre and performance can play a role in questioning existing narratives by sharing the voices of those who are less represented or heard. In line with Burke’s argument that memory-making goes through interpretation, selection, and distortion, Carlson<sup>50</sup> argues that cultural memory, just like the memory of individuals, is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts.

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47 Yvette Hutchison, *South African Performance and Archives of Memory* (Manchester University Press, 2013).

48 Patrizia Violi, *Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Space, History* (Peter Lang, 2017).

49 Peter Burke, History as Social Memory, in *Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1989), 97–113.

50 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (University of Michigan Press, 2003).

# Ghetto Sheriff

I watched the play *Ghetto Sheriff* in Budapest, Hungary in 2019. The play was eighty minutes long and was staged in total darkness. Whenever I narrate this experience, I highlight that I didn't "watch" the play, but rather that I experienced it. The entire play was performed in total darkness. The website where the play was advertised put up a question and an answer: "How can we talk about the biggest trauma of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Holocaust? According to the renowned director, János Mohácsi and his former students, we can do so with the help of Jewish jokes and songs, documents from the '30s and '40s, and by reciting them – in pitch darkness."<sup>51</sup> This description gives the reader a glimpse into what the play is about, and the different media used in the creation of this play including darkness.

The texts used in the play were primarily based on personal memories, which were selected by the director János Mohácsi and the actors. In order to put together this play, texts from the film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann and other sources such as "case studies, survivor testimonies, literary works, diary notes, historical sources, official reports and personal collections to evoke the historical period and the mood of the time"<sup>52</sup> were used. These examples of sources are forms of memory media that are used to create play. Since the play is crafted into a theatrical performance, the play stands out as an independent creation and becomes a medium of memory.

Aside from the different media used in *Ghetto Sheriff*, such as music and written work, pitch darkness was used as a significant part of the delivery of the play. The question remains as to what message is transmitted when a play is staged in total darkness while talking about the Holocaust. A play in the darkness could imply the darkness and sadness of the Holocaust. In this regard, the medium used, darkness, could be part of the message, which aligns with Marshall McLuhan's "the medium

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51 Örkény Színház, "Ghetto Sheriff," Örkény Színház, accessed December 14 2019, <https://www.orkenyszinhaz.hu/en/2012-09-17-12-53-31/repertoire?view=szinlap&id=1674>.

52 Örkény Színház.

is the message.”<sup>53</sup> The playwright chose to have it performed in darkness for a reason. Darkness itself is a message or part of the play’s overall message. It can be argued that darkness in *Ghetto Sheriff* was meant to depict the dark years of the Holocaust. A time of death, pain, and sadness. Additionally, the eighty minutes of darkness and the hearing of discussions about the Holocaust is used in the play as a way of having the audience pay more attention to what they hear and not what they see on the stage. Members of the audience create their own images in darkness, as opposed to plays or films that generate imagery for the audience. Instead of focusing on the exceptionality of the actors and their deserving of applause, the darkness helps the audience to focus more on the matter under discussion. This is not to say the performers were not exceptional, however, the theme of the play and the direction of the creator focused more on the message of the play, leaving everyone else in “darkness”.

Experiencing something in darkness can be chaotic. I once dined in total darkness at a restaurant and some of the diners left because of the disorder that ensued. Despite the chaos in the restaurant, the noise, and not knowing what was on my plate and where my glass of water was, I had a great conversation with the stranger I sat next to. With the right strategy, the experience of darkness can be worthwhile. As opposed to the chaos in the case of the dinner in the dark, the theatre setting with *Ghetto Sheriff* helped the audience to focus. We didn’t have to do much, except to sit and listen. As an audience member, I experienced the play as an individual without much focus on the collective experience. Although I could get a sense of the reactions of fellow theatre attendees during the performance, more of the collective experience came after the play as we stepped out. Otherwise, we sat down and followed the performance wherever the actors’ voices came from. I have watched a fair share of stage plays. Ironically, one of the most memorable plays is one I never “watched” *Ghetto Sheriff*. After the play, I had a chat with one of the actors, to learn more about their experiences. This gave me more insight into their theatre-making process and was another reminder of the unconfined nature

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53 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964).

of the work we do: theatre-making. Having looked at the two plays independently, I will now bring in Spencer's spectrum on storytelling while discussing the two plays with a focus on theatre and memory.

## Theatre, memory and Spencer's spectrum of storytelling

Whether performed inside a hall or created in an open space, with a script or without, in Budapest or in Lusaka, the immediacy of theatre in terms of how it affects audiences makes it relevant to our discussion on theatre as an effective medium of memory. In writing about theatre, Carlson asserts that theatre is a repository of cultural memory that provides society "with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations."<sup>54</sup> Based on Carlson's assertion, watching and engaging with plays can be a way of learning more about society, its fears, challenges, and aspirations among other things. This process is not limited to the performance only, the process of writing, rehearsal, advertising, and discussions after the play is part of the larger process of playmaking and experience. For some plays, like *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* and *Ghetto Sheriff*, the goal is not only to remember but also to speak to the present. Such plays also have implications for the future because they highlight the wrongs of the past in the hope that such wrongs are avoided in the future.

In making a piece of theatre, particularly a nonfictional theatrical work, a lot of time is taken to look at different media. Written work, videos, pictures, and so on help to create the story and ensure that a correct narrative is being projected. In the performance itself, aside from seeing performers on stage, different media such as video, lighting, sound, and set design can be used to get the message across. In the case of *Ghetto Sheriff*, the playwright uses darkness as a medium. The different strategies used to convey the message help the audience to grasp the intended message, though they can also have their own interpretation. The way the stage or the space of the performance looks

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54 Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*.

creates an impression of what the play is about and the target audience.<sup>55</sup> The message of all this stagecraft is important; however, it is never the whole message, as the audience members can interpret the message of the play differently depending on what is happening on the stage at different times.

As shown by Spencer, not only does theatre have a strong visual aspect which has an immediate effect on the audience, it also has the effect of prose; contemplation and analysis, things which are personal.<sup>56</sup> Theatre can be distinguished from other art forms because it affects audiences emotionally, subliminally, and intellectually in a direct way.<sup>57</sup> Below is an adapted version of Spencer’s depiction of how theatre works compared to film and prose.

<b>FILM</b>	▶	<b>THEATRE</b>	◀	<b>PROSE</b>
Immediate		Immediate		Contemplative
Visceral		Contemplative		Analytical
		Visceral		
		Analytical		

Figure 1 – Spencer’s comparison of theatre to film and prose; Adapted from Spencer, 2002.<sup>58</sup>

Though *Ghetto Sheriff* did not have any visuals for the most part, it had an immediate and visceral effect. As an audience member, it allowed me to be part of a memory I never experienced. Allowing audience members to be part of a memory they never experienced also applies to *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*. The difference is that the case of the Lumpa Church in *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* has no agreed narrative and is still controversial. There are still major disagreements, as can be seen from a newspaper article commenting on the play:

55 Nigel Llewellyn, “Honour in Life, Death and in the Memory: Funeral Monuments in Early Modern England,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1996): 179–200, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679235>.

56 Spencer, *The Playwright’s Guidebook*.

57 Gene A. Plunka, *Holocaust Drama: The Theater of Atrocity*, Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

58 Spencer, *The Playwright’s Guidebook*. p.10.

A play on such a controversial figure as Lenshina (original name being Regina) is always going to divide public opinion, and at the end of the performance on Friday, you could hear some members of the audience expressing strong opinions in the foyer with what they thought were some misrepresentations in the play. Both the writer and director must have expected this; the nature of the subject was always going to attract the other view.<sup>59</sup>

The goal for *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* was, therefore, not to take sides, rather to allow the audience to have an experience of different arguments, and question what they have always known as the correct position on what transpired with the Lumpa Church.

When a play is staged or performed, the playwright, director, and actors are not the only ones in charge of interpretation. The audience has a role in interpretation, seeing as theatre is live, something which allows the audience to contemplate and analyse things in the moment. There is no controlling narrative voice, rather there are different ways of viewing things.<sup>60</sup> In the case of *Ghetto Sherriff*, the use of darkness further reduced the strength of the power of imagery, because audience members use their own imagination more. Though performative theories tend to look at the performance of memory as a real-life performance, such as via ways of doing things daily and not taking the form of a staged memory in a play, I argue that theatre is a good way of enabling the representation of people in a performance, and have them question their expected ways of performance in society.<sup>61</sup> By performance in society, I refer to day-to-day patterns of life. If people can question their expected ways of the performance of themselves, and that of society, they can question memories too.

Theatre stands out in providing a new interpretation because it can use different media to interpret the past with the script being the first point of interpretation. When the

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59 Kelvin Kachingwe, "Two Historical Plays in Town," Newspaper, *Zambia Daily Mail* (blog), April 7, 2018, <http://www.daily-mail.co.zm/two-historical-plays-in-town/>.

60 Spencer, *The Playwright's Guidebook*.

61 Gearoid Millar, "Performative Memory and Re-Victimization: Truth-Telling and Provocation in Sierra Leone," *Memory Studies* 8, no. 2 (April 1, 2015): 242–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698013519123>.



playwright finalises the script and rehearsal starts, the rehearsals are combined with interpretation. Though very important in theatre, the script is open to changes and interpretation by the actors and directors, however, the playwright's consent is needed. The process of rehearsal gives actors and the director an opportunity to create a piece of work that would be able to challenge the targeted audience so that when they are out of the theatre or space of performance, they would have had an experience that allows them to challenge their perspectives. The rehearsal process also changes the perspectives of the actors and the director. In my work as a theatremaker, I have had to change the direction of a play on several occasions following discussions and views shared during the rehearsal process.

In the case of the play on Lenshina and the Lumpa church, the contention is not only on how the followers of the Lumpa Church are branded, but also about the fact that over 1000 people died in the conflict that ensued in 1964. There still exist two parallel explanations of what led to the disturbances. In the case of *Ghetto Sherriff*, the play is not disputing an already existing narrative of the Holocaust, rather it tells it from different perspectives using the experiences of survivors and a totally different medium: theatre in pitch darkness. Though it might be difficult to talk about, theatre, in the dark, creates an environment where a dark period in history can be discussed and remembered. One of the jokes in *Ghetto Sherriff* was, "How do Jewish kids play hide and seek? In through the door, out through the chimney." "Insensitive" as the joke might sound, it's a stark reminder of the Holocaust. Additionally, it shows how humour can be used to highlight dark memories. Humour was used in both plays, and there were instances where the audiences were laughing, yet the memories contained within the two plays were not meant to be funny. Though there is no clear indication that the two plays helped communities remember or question, beyond the ones who watched the plays, the experience of being part of such plays allows for collective remembrance.<sup>62</sup>

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62 Tanveer Ajsi, "Footprints without Feet: Theatre as Recourse to Collective Memory in Kashmir," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 28, no. 3 (July 3, 2023): 414–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2023.2230150>.

## Conclusions

The two plays, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth and Ghetto Sherriff*, though conceptualised in two different locations, Zambia, and Hungary respectively, speak the language of theatre and storytelling that theatremakers and audiences in different spaces and settings can identify with. The creators of these two memory plays use theatre as a medium of memory by speaking to themes that invoke memory. The plays combine different media to create one medium (the play) to invoke memory as well as question memory, as is the case with *Lenshina: The Uprising*. This shows commonality in the way theatrical plays are created. In both cases, the medium, which is the play, is not meant to be the message, the content of the play, though experienced differently, is what the message is. The concepts can, therefore, be applied in both the African (Zambia) and European (Hungary) contexts. It's a reminder of the closeness and proximity of artists, audiences, and stories themselves, despite our perceived differences because of distance, location, borders, and other settings that separate us.

The similarities in theatrical concepts and the overall message of the plays can be an entry point for collaboration in creating theatrical works meant to deconfine our world-views. Having experienced both *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* and *Ghetto Sherriff*, my conclusion is that concepts in both memory plays can be shared in the two contexts as they speak to similar themes of oppression and trauma.

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**A Spirit of  
storytelling and  
metaphor and  
the importance  
of language**

KLARA WOJTKOWSKA

# How I Learned to Pray

*a fictional memoir*

Unlike my four siblings, I was born an immigrant, the strange sort, you know. Born between countries, in the cradle of my people's enemies, rather than their refuge. I was born among Germans, who once tried to exterminate my Polish grandparents. I lived there for only two weeks, sandwiched between the love and fear of my parents, sleeping and feeding and absorbing the stresses of my Polish family, before I was taken across yet another border in the cold, dark recess of a cardboard box. Oblivious, helpless, packaged, I was taken to another country not my own. The United States. I was born a Polish citizen, to Polish parents, yet, from the beginning, it appears, I had no home.

Immigrants speak a common language. We read signs, glean multiple languages, feel the environment with a sixth sense, not striving to fit in, no, but walking that tightrope of being yourself and being a person. Being yourself – the foreigner. Being a new person – becoming recognisable enough to your environment to grant you the human dignity you need to survive.

We immigrants come in all shapes and sizes, true, but we never assume that we are home. That the place we are physically in belongs to us. We never take home for granted. Rather, we are always looking for it, in moments, in tastes, in smells, in the language of our birth. We know that home is an elusive phenomenon, and this can make us a little paranoid. Additionally, media and immigration do spawn a particular kind of paranoia, especially when migrant numbers are bolstered by war or famine. But when we are comfortable and feel at home, when paranoia does not eat at the frayed edges of our anxious dreams,

then we are the most open and friendly people you will find. We have a particular eye and ear for welcoming otherness. We know it is necessary. We are not threatened by it. This is why, in all of the shouting of the times, repeated images on tv, headlines scrolling the newspapers with words like Migrants! Exiles! Refugees! Asylum seekers! and all of that nonsense – I maintain that immigrants are God’s gift to a nation. We may be a difficult gift, yes, but a gift nonetheless. There is nobody who can serve as a prophet to a nation, except for one who first of all – has eyes and ears that see the people from the outside, that hold a particular vision and see the whole without the myopic blindness that being too much of an insider gives you. And secondly, we love that culture enough to learn it, to understand it, to invest in it. We immigrants, more than anyone else, know how to celebrate the culture that has given us a home. Because we are gifted with home, not born into it. Like converts everywhere, when they are not zealots, we are people who love and appreciate a new home on mature, adult terms. We know the difference between having a home and not having one. We give what we have to give, because that is the basis of home.

It is no wonder, then, that I felt Zimbabwe to be my home from the very first time my feet touched her soil. Ten years ago, when I passed through the country on a journey hopping from bus to bus to bus – from Bulawayo, to Victoria Falls, to Harare, to Maputo. At the time, I was performing for the Polish Diaspora in South Africa. Songs of immigrants, indeed! To me, Zimbabwe and Poland felt the same, the black birds circling the Soviet-style city buildings crackled their voices in the air in the same way, the morning sun smelled the same, the trees smiled and tossed about the manes of their glorious green crowns, here and there alike. This was where I met the *mbira*, the silver keys twinkling their songs jubilantly, waking the sleeping Ancestors. We have Ancestor ceremonies in Poland too, I thought, as I learned my first *mbira* songs. We also have songs that wake up the Ancestors, and masks that we wear when we dance with them in Ceremony – just as in Zimbabwe, we pound the ngoma skins and *mbira* keys and dance wild dances until the Ancestors arrive.

The day I arrived, I walked to a market in Bulawayo. Underneath a bright blue, generous sky, I examined piles of

dried mopane worms, and spoke to the hawking women about their lives. They smiled a lot, laughed a lot. The surrounding trees and birds seemed to smile and laugh as well. Nature loved its people, and the people loved nature. I saw a mbira for the first time. It looked so odd, a tablet with keys on it – yet immediately, it was familiar to me. As though I knew it from lifetimes past. It fit well and warmly into my hands, just like the violin.

I fell in love with Zimbabwe, because I love Poland. The two countries have the same Spirit at their root – a Spirit of honouring and loving the forests and the mountains and the waters. A Spirit of honouring the mermaids, who abound in Poland. A Spirit of storytelling and metaphor and the importance of language. I love Poland, and therefore will always love Zimbabwe. Both things are equally true and hold equal weight in my life.

I had no idea then, how deep, how far, these dimensions and times and places would go. That my Polish Ancestors were waiting for me in Zimbabwe, alongside a mermaid and a big lion.

Waiting for me to return.

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## WARSZAWA, POLAND TWO YEARS EARLIER

July days are strange, I think to myself, sweating, as my feet pound the sidewalk dutifully, and I pick up my violin, still suffering at the luthier's in Warszawa. I refuse to call it War-saw – yes, we have seen war, but there is no need to emphasise our trauma. The name Warszawa comes from Wars i Sawa, and the love between a fisherman and a mermaid that birthed the city.

I pass a wrinkled, dry-sponge-in-a-bath, old man playing the violin on a corner. He seems unconvinced himself, his fingers falling arbitrarily on nonsensical notes – backtracking, repeating the same notes. Is he practising? Trying to remember? Where are the violin geniuses of today? The violin has fallen out of fashion, to be played by quasi-homeless shadows along the Wisła river. It used to be a ceremonial instrument. It used to be known to induce spiritual possession . . . just like the mbira. Cold and hungry, I look across to the coffee shop, and dig into my pockets. I count twenty zlotys.

What do I do?

Where do I go?

Nothing in my life has worked out. I'm thirty. I have no skills except for playing the fiddle; no income, a body not strong enough to go West for manual labour – likely picking strawberries or taking care of the elderly. Something inside of me responds to this ill-feeling with a familiar death wish. Maybe I shouldn't be here at all? I don't know who else to be. The Ancients said our destiny was written in the stars. I always imagined it to be grand, wonderful and meaningful. But where is the meaning in my life now?

I go into the coffee shop to ask about a job. Again.

A man with a towel on his shoulder shakes his head, and I feel the nerves in my stomach sizzle unpleasantly, then hollow out as if a giant dragon had just taken a sumptuous bite out of my intestines.

Coffee shops don't want violinists anymore.

Violinists are a dime a dozen these days, and nobody really knows their purpose anymore. I have been taught music, yes, but I am longing for its power.

I was taught that music was a nice thing, and that if you are good at it, then you could potentially make it your job, and get paid money and survive by doing it. I played on the streets of Warsaw and Sweden and the UK and Ireland, and collected coins and bills into my violin case; I learned in music schools and from teachers and played Wieniawski's 'Legend' at my brother's funeral and my aunt's. I was taught that music was important and beautiful in the cultural sense – but I was never taught about its power.

There were slight intimations, sure. Very slight.

In the story of Beethoven I was taught not about the power of his music, but the power of the man who overcame a disability, in order to keep himself close to music. In the story of Wieniawski's Legend, I was taught that it is possible to move somebody through music so much that they change their mind about an important issue.

But the power of music? Something that makes it worth engaging in; over business, or law, or medicine? Why would a young adult put down their phone in favour of a violin? Isn't the phone also a means of communication? And aren't both



simply tools of entertainment? Entertainment is good, sure. But it's not power. It's not the same as bombing a country, or being president, or having people do what you say. Singing songs doesn't seem like a very serious business. In fact, it seems like something that the whole world has declared it can do without – look at how musicians are treated, not paid, disrespected.

In a culture without ceremony, musicians cannot know their power.

A bird suddenly slams against the window. There is no work for me here. I have no power.

My legs grow weak, and I sit down for a moment. A moment later, a tall African woman approaches me. Glowing. There is no other word to describe her. Her beauty is so brilliant, that for a moment, I suspect she is a ghost. I hear her laugh tinkle, and it makes me look around. Did she answer my thought?

She lowers her head as she passes by. "There is a place waiting for you..." she says.

Did she whisper this?

"There is a place waiting for you... ask your Ancestors where to go. They will tell you."

She repeats herself. Still and sure. Then gone. The unwashed windows blink like the tired glasses of a surprised librarian.

Ask my Ancestors? As far as I'm concerned, Ancestors are for people with nice families. My family is bitter as an early-felled apple. Rotten. Too late to grow into anything sweet. Too early to save our hopes for the next lifetime. Scattered across the world, traumatised by the violence and cruelty of a childhood spent training in destroying one another, we have little use, need, or desire for contact. This I've noticed – Slavic people have a powerful Ancestral tradition, and yet the most traumatised and sad families I've seen anywhere.

So, who are these Ancestors?

I ruminate, while the sun sets, and the greasy windows blush with rosy glee.

I close my eyes...

*The Slavic Ancestors, alive in our Motanka dolls that protect the home, and any person or desire or destiny that you choose. The Slavic Ancestors, dancing alongside the river, before throwing in the Marzanna doll in order to guarantee fertility for both people and nature.*

*The Slavic Ancestors living in Mokosz, the queen of the Earth, the wet one, the Great Mother...*

Do they mean anything to me? Do they know who I am?  
Can I – I, their descendant talk to them? Implore them?

I breathe again in prayer, “Where do I go?”

The bell on the door rings, and a tall man walks into the coffeeshop. His hands are full of phone, his voice loud as a morning alarm, and his steps so concrete that dreams dissipate like a fog in the breath of the sun. I’m startled. A waitress leans over to wipe my table, “Would you like to order anything?”. She knows that I will say no. Again.

The tall man pats the counter impatiently, turning towards me slightly. He winks in my direction and I blush. It’s not common here, to be addressed so obviously. On his T-shirt, the words “Göttingen, Germany” reach for me. My breath catches. My birth place.

The Ancestors are here. They are knocking.

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My aunt used to read me the *Fisherman and the Golden Fish*, when I was a child. I loved that story. The book had a cover so old that the picture was barely visible. A dolphin? A harp? Neither? The threads of the book were so loose, like stories searching for good endings. I would ask for this story again and again, always hoping that at the end, this time, the wife would get a settlement. The greedy wife perhaps, wouldn’t become God, but she could still have a nice house. She could still be happy.

Aha! Could I ever be happy? In this grey land? Was I the wife who wanted too much?

“Tell me a story!”, cries the child on the train. I’m on my way now. I’m on my way to the root of the root, and the mouth of my own terrible river. I’m going to the place where I was born.

“Tell me a story!”, cries the child again.

*A story? I know a story...*

*Once upon a time...*

*And the thread is woven, tucked neatly into the story of the fisherman and the golden fish who grants him wishes, and every day he returns with another, more magnificent wish from his greedy wife...*

The child falls asleep. The mother, a woman with a tired face and red earrings, looks grateful for the reprieve, and closes her eyes too.

I look out the train window. The story is not about greed at all. The story is about a woman who recognises when she is being short-changed. Why? Because she's been fed illusions all along. Why? Because she was not the one creating her own life. And so, at the end of the story, when the Fisherman's Wife asks to be made God, she is put back into her life – exactly at that place where she was before – so that she herself can now design it. So that her Soul can create, and truly be God, not simply a recipient of blessings from that less-than-ideal-translator of her desires, her husband. And even the Gods of the Sea knew this. They looked at the Fisherman's wife, and said: "bless you, bless you, bless you, Queen."

That Woman was a Wise Woman indeed.

Like her, I travel now to bargain with the Ancestors who ushered me into this world, my mbira light, small and strong in my hand, the wood and metal solid and affirming – compared to the heavy, yet delicate violin. The rhythms and melodies of this Zimbabwean instrument are exotic here, and playing it has gotten me more than a few gigs.

The trees whiz by outside, as if they are the ones on a train and I am the one sitting still, in the centre of the world. I pluck a few notes, and the air changes; shimmers, colours. Some Spirit stirs. I now know what I will be asking for: a home, a place where I can create.

I doze off, lulled by the rhythm of steel wheels gliding on steel tracks. In my distant dream, figures appear. All kinds. Women, men, light beings. Their laughter sounds like many mbiras made of colour, made of light. The sounds intensify, until I myself feel that I am turned into a giant mbira, playing the songs and rhythms of my soul and interweaving them with the song and rhythm of the Universe. My body starts vibrating. When I think that I will explode from the intensity of the vibration, I hear these words:

"You are a shaman."

*I'm a what?*

"You are a ceremonialist."

*How?*

“Go to Zimbabwe. They will explain things to you there...”

*My hand, relaxed by sleep, unconsciously relaxes, and the mbira thuds on the carpeted floor of the train – keys ringing.*

*Zimbabwe.*

Fine, fine. I say, fine.

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Göttingen, Germany. Why Göttingen? A city whose name I can scarcely pronounce? I am here for only two weeks. Not long enough to learn any language, to be granted any citizenship, or to be given a real chance. Why did I come here the way I did? If nothing is a coincidence in life, then certainly the manner of arrival in this world, and place of birth cannot be random.

The closer we get now, to this magical place as the train wheels spin my fate like the Great Goddess spins destiny, the more the air seems to calm inside and outside of myself. As if I have crossed a border into an idyllic land that only exists sometimes, in moments, when the world closes its eyes, and breathes peacefully. The green is greener here, the flowers more intense. I feel as if I am swimming through goodness.

In Africa, it is well known that bargaining for your life cannot happen without the presence of the spirits who saw you through the portal. In Africa, the place where all of us originated, this is well known. This is why, every person must, at some point, go back to their own beginning. As the shaman who changed everything later told me: “your home is somewhere else.”

Here is the truth: I am going to bargain for my life now. That is my intention. I have nothing to impress with: bags of dirty clothes, a mbira, an exhausted body, a fear for my travels, a fear for my life. Where should I go now? I still ask. Where is my place in the world? Does it exist? Or am I like millions of others, young people, disillusioned by politics, tradition, religion, profession, psychology, and more politics, more tradition, more religion, more professions and pop-psychologies. Yet, the exhaustion I feel for my quality of life; the skating over thin surfaces, the lack of roots and stability, the strange dissociation between me and others, the lack of home, the strange loneliness that is starting to settle into the air I breathe, the food I eat, the obsessions, the sadness, the strange death wish that

has haunted me for so many years now, off and on – all of that, surely can be bargained for. In the place of my birth. Maybe the spirits there have been searching for their child for all of these years. Maybe they are waiting for me. In Germany, or maybe in Zimbabwe? Maybe they are the ones who can give me life, now that it seems that the only thing possible in my life is death.

I have lost every hand I have played. Africa breaks me every time I go – and yes, I have been. There is some sadness in me that I can't shake, and some suicidal fantasy that is only growing. A sadness I see in the faces of the people around me – in the stores, on the sidewalks, in the schools, on the screens... a sadness that I see in my own country, addicted to war and memories of war. Why do they call it 'Warsaw', after all? Why can't they call it Warszawa, like the story goes, about the fisherman and the mermaid and their great love that birthed the city... Why do they have to call it WAR-SAW? As if we need a reminder. The ghosts of my own dead ancestors have haunted me since before I was born. How many people in my country, my age, can say the same?

Desires haunt me. Desires that I hate myself for, for my inability to either fulfil them, or give them up – a dissociation from God and the Spirit. It is true that life owes us nothing, maybe, but I want life, I do. I want life, a real human life. That, or death. I don't want this strange in-between anymore. So I am going to bargain for my life. To say my words and pray my prayers and try my best for them to not be heard as a complaint. To impress the spirits of the lonely land I am going to, where there is a huge old and famous university. I never hear about the spirits of Göttingen, no. I hear about astronomers and mathematicians and physicists. There is little else that I know about the place.

Who is waiting for me there, on the other side of Time?

*I don't know how to pray. In my country, prayer is for the zealots, for the fanatics, for the cruel and political church. Yet now, I need to pray the prayers of the ceremony that has begun. And I ask the Good Spirit: please, let my prayers be good and beautiful and let my words and my songs be true. And let me say the things that need to be said, both in supplication and gratitude in equal measure, so that the spirits of whom I am asking for life, for roots, for Home – may they also feel and know my gratitude for the life that they shepherded me into thirty-two years ago.*

“Ceremony?”

This is the question the old man from Zimbabwe asks me, as I am sitting under the tree in Göttingen.

It’s day five. I plonk away at the mbira, sweating and conscious that people who pass by stare. Spontaneous live music under the trees seems to be just as much a foreigner these days as my own magical self – of course, there are no coincidences. Of course, every prayer is answered before you even ask the question. Of course, the same mbira that makes me other is the one that attracts Tendai, for that is the man’s name. He asks if he can touch the mbira, and after I give my consent, he leans over to stroke the keys with his tough fingers. He laughs in amusement. I think I am being serious, but evidently...

Tendai sits down, rubs his palms together. From his pocket he fishes out a small pyramid-shaped container, containing some brown powder, and without a word, throws it on the ground.

“There is your prayer!” he says, after muttering some words.

“But a prayer is not a prayer without a story... The Ancestors’ gave us stories so that we may pray with a full, multi-layered, explanations-thoroughly-unnecessary, style. So, maybe we can begin a story about Ceremony with a story about wonder. He moves his hip away from a root jutting out of the ground, and settles himself comfortably. I mirror him, preparing to hear his story.

“On the day that my only living Grandmother died,” Tendai tells me, “on that very same day, one of my close relatives was hit by a car and almost died. I was in Harare at the time, and though my grandmother had died here, and I was getting ready to go to my grandmother’s funeral, I received a phone call from some policemen saying that they had found this cousin of mine on a bicycle, that they had no ID, but that through some miracle they had traced a call that had been made to my phone earlier that day. That is how the Ancestors work – through coincidence-”

*...of course there are no coincidences...*

Tendai continues, “So instead of going North, to Poland, to be with the dead, I stayed in place, to be with living family.

It pained me, but my Grandmother could hear my songs, from where I was, this I knew.

In this place between life and death, when I didn't know which one I was – alive, or dead – my father called me on the phone from South Africa. He could not afford a ticket to come and bury his mother, and the pain of that went so deep and so far that we spoke nothing of it.”

I want to say something, to acknowledge this painful detail, yet I don't want to interrupt the story. Tendai looks at me, as if acknowledging my thought, and then continues.

“The biggest pains go unnamed, I'm sure you know. You seem like a person who has known pain.”

I don't nod. He pauses for a bit, but continues, “So, my father called me on the phone, and talked not of his dead mother, but instead about the meteorite that fell to Earth in Russia at that time. It was a remarkable occurrence. Yet we were all grieving. We were all in awe. We were all sad. We were all shaken. My father on the phone was saying that he wanted young people to be able to stand in awe of the mystery of something – the mysteries of the Universe – instead of wondering how to earn money and become bankers. I remember the way he spoke, the words he used...”

“Awe. Wonder. Spirit. Devotion. Beauty.

Magic. Mystery. Grandeur. LIFE.”

“In Polish, you would say, *zachwycić się wreszcie*,” I say to him.

He smiles, “And I remember how true it felt, even if my father himself has trouble being awestruck by life, and comes across as fairly cynical. The lessons I learned from my father, I often had to sneak out the back door, disentangle the gems from the broken-hearted cynicism and cruelty of a man who saw all of the wrong things before he could enjoy anything that might be good.”

A wind had started up in the trees, and a red squirrel paused near us, wondering if we were going to eat. The wind, the tree, the squirrel... so peaceful. I felt a page turn, and the awe Tendai had just spoken of tapped on my shoulder.

“This I learned from my father, then: to chase the things that strike awe into us. Sometimes that takes being very broken, many times – the meteorites that fall onto the earth fall hard.

They splinter, shatter both themselves and the things that they hit. Still, they are a gorgeous sweep of fire across the heavens. Still, we open ourselves up to the magic. Life is too short for us to even have time to get tired of it. Such a thing is a spirit-sickness – such a thing is a way that we do not move with our Spirits, and we cannot come with the proper humility and opening of ourselves to Awe, into Ceremony.”

Tendai smiled again. He had been in Poland for a while before coming to Göttingen for his son’s University graduation. He would be going back to Poland in a few weeks, and then back to Zimbabwe, soon. “Too cold for him,” he said. What he didn’t say, or need to: “Too far away from home.”

We sat there for a while, watching the peaceful sun rock to sleep in the arms of a gentle horizon. I thought of Tendai’s story, how beautiful it was, and how terrible too. How death strikes awe into our hearts sometimes, just as much as life does. How complicated life has become, how far from the simplicity of holding a mbira. How we are all ransacked, overwhelmed, and overcome by the spiritual and artistic options of today. We need to – all of us – become marketing professionals, know how to tell other people what they are getting from us. We – all of us, now – are being told to give people what they want. And what do people want? Bread and Circuses, it seems. We can’t know how to ask for magic – it is not in our realm. It is a grace. It is given. In the same vein it seems foolish to go to the Spirits all of the time, and ask for what we want, to cry for what we need: rather, it makes more sense to go to the Spirits and say: *strike us with Awe. Strike Awe into our hearts. Shake up our Spirit.*

Then, under a tree, surrounded by busy students walking along the tree-lined pathways, Tendai and I prayed. We pray for real. The cars whizz by on the street. A dove calls in the distance. The sky is small, and now, as the light is dying, gets smaller still. And we hold hands, both foreigners, and the only words I can think of, are:

“Please, all of you Big and Beautiful Ones...rid my communication of any unnecessary human words, and add in whatever it is that you know, that needs to be said. Help me connect to this fundamental, wordless humility. Help me feel.”



We end there. The ritual is done. The trees are smiling, the sky a deep, dozing blue, and I am certain where it is that I need to go to. I stand up, knowing this:

*Conversation with Spirit is a communication. In this sense, Ceremony is not for people alone.*

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*At some point in my mourning over the loss of depth in the languages of the world – skated over, flattened, squished and squeezed by the imperialistic English tongue – I realised that there is no such thing as a take without give, even in the mixing of languages. The style of the native language will always be mixed in with the new coloniser’s tongue, which is why the English languages of Africa are the ones that move me most, far more than the British which supposedly exemplifies the language by having the most words in it. This is why Zimbabwean English has a depth that American English does not – it is because of the weight of the words, and the weight the words are given stems not from the English language, but from the language of Home, which is Shona or Ndebele, or yet another language. This is why my own English will never be English as English is supposed to be, as it would be if my first language were not Polish. Polish is what gives my English words weight. So perhaps at this point I approach with deep scepticism anything that I think linguists are saying about being or not-being multilingual – what it is or is not. Yes, multiple languages can create confusion in our heads, but the truth is our hearts are never confused, not even with the various tastes of many different words and languages. Which is also why language itself does not necessarily have much to do with communication, but rather with taste, with processing, with living. Words must be earned, before they can be given the fortitude of a vocal life.*

*Still, as the strange immigrants of today, we are in danger of falling between the cracks of languages, cultures, countries, and experiences, until we are at risk of not being understood by anybody at all. This is where I find myself now going to Zimbabwe... a tourist, an illegal immigrant, a whatever, a murungu, a foreigner, a guest – travelling now, flying, to Zimbabwe, pulled to a broken country, and though I don’t know it yet – I will have the experience of being broken by it over, and over again, until it seems to me that broken is the only way I can describe myself, my life, my purpose; until the feeling that the only thing I can do now, is be re-born, properly, properly this time – In a ceremony,*

*with all the people dancing, and singing, and playing the drums. My own rebirth now – it is time for my own rebirth!*

*It is time now.*

*I feel so terribly, terribly old...*

*How is it that life is so long and so short at the same time? Too short to lap up all of the goodness, too long to survive the travails of an all-too-sensitive heart.*

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## HARARE, ZIMBABWE

Tendai convinced me to go to Zimbabwe.

His prayer – not mine – did the trick.

His song – not mine – vibrated through me.

My dream – nobody else’s – sealed the deal, and here I was, in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe.

I arrive at noon, to a blazing sun which wakes me after multiple flights. Giant billboards emblazoned “HIFA – the Harare International Festival of the Arts” are lit up by it. The colours are so bright, like dancing genies freed from their bottles. I have just spent some months in Peru, learning songs and engaging in plant dietas (“sama” in Shipibo, which means “alone” in Polish, and that is exactly what a dieta is meant to be – a process of being alone, cut off from the outside, building relationships with plant spirits through song and ceremony), and now I land where my dreams have told me I am meant to be. What awaits me here?

The billboards invite me effectively. I go to the Harare Gardens, in the centre of the city, where the Festival is going on – in May, early winter. There I meet a man who sells *nyunga nyunga*: “shining, glimmering, star” mbira. I like them very much, and, inspired by Chiwoniso Maraire and her songs, I buy one. I ask the man if he knows of any *bira* ceremonies (Ancestor ceremonies) that are happening, as I am there in search of them. Having experienced the sacred plant ceremonies as well as the song ceremonies of my Nez-Perce Teacher, Phil’s, homeland, I am hungry for ceremony. I want to experience, deeply, songs in this sacred context – here, in Zimbabwe.

My mentioning *bira* changes this man's disposition towards me. From an affable tourist, I mutate to somebody who knows something. He relaxes, and talks more, and it is then, that he tells me this very interesting thing: "If our young people knew the power of the instrument you have in your hands, then they would be walking around and playing mbiras instead of playing with their cell phones. They would be carrying mbiras in their bags, and using their thumbs and fingers to play them on the transport and in the cities, instead of typing all of the time into their machines."

I have thought of this audacious phrase many times since then, watching our world devolve into screen after screen, our eyes going numb with the artificial light of the entertainment Frankensteins that we ourselves have created.

I arrive in Zimbabwe with six instruments: my djembe, my mbira, my violin, my karimba, my flutes, and a rattle. The mbira, the spiritual legacy of Zimbabwe, was one big part of me being here. I wanted to learn to play "properly" as they say. Thus far, I learned songs from the man who sold me my karimba as well as from YouTube, and I also improvised and composed my own songs in ceremony, as they came. Though I learned traditional songs, and their power, my own songs came too, full force, often wordless – sometimes simply a tangling of sound that didn't fit into any category. The songs that came were simple, often focused on one word, one truth, one idea, one longing of my heart, and sometimes one story. That's how I learned to play. All attempts, earlier and later, to fit myself into a mould failed.

I learned within traditions, and then promptly turned everything I learned around and did it my own way. At some point, I justified this through the explanation that I was a woman, and my teachers were mostly men, in some cases deeply embedded in patriarchal traditions. But there's another, less gendered, and more comfortable explanation, which is that all traditional healers are different: each traditional healer has their own way. We can learn, we can borrow, we can use, we can enter into cultural paradigms, but ultimately, each healer has their own way, their own spirits, their own Ancestors, their own guardians, their own walk. In a traditional context, this is well understood: a healer is not meant to be a copy of another

person. A healer is meant to be absolutely original. A healer is meant to receive guidance from the Spirit.

Healers – whether they be shamans, *masvikiro* or *ng'an-ga* singers or both – are a gift to their community, not because they fit in, but because their ears are poised to hear the sounds that come from the outside. So the mix and match of who we may be never looks one and the same, and the old people in the village know that when a person behaves a certain way, it is the essence, or the impulse behind the behaviour that must be first understood and supported, rather than the whole behaviour being trashed, shamed, and chastised.

As the Wise Elder Pathisa Nyathi says repeatedly: “The spiritual principles governing all of the traditions are the same. The same, the same, the same.”

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Some weeks later, I am invited to an Ancestor Ceremony. There, amid the mbira playing, drums, dancing, traditional beer and general enthusiasm, I am confronted by an ancestral spirit.

“There is something different about you”, the Svikiro tells me. “Your Ancestors never did violence to my Ancestors.”

He seems surprised. He didn't know you could be a white person without carrying on your back dead coloniser-relatives, but from the perspective of African Tradition, this is extremely important. When we meet, what my Ancestors did or did not do matters, it weaves into the fabric of our interaction. The *Ngozi*, the hungry ghosts, must be fed – but they must be fed honestly.

That the Slavs have an Ancestral tradition very close to the *Shona*, and that we did not colonise each other – this seems to enable us to tap into a deep river of connection that goes beyond immediate, surface level assumptions, and instead is the voice of Spirit in our Lives.

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TWO YEARS LATER...  
HARARE, ZIMBABWE

It all seems game-like, somehow, at this moment, years later, after I have gone to Zimbabwe, been minced through the meat-grinder of several initiations. “It was a gamble,” people say. “Why Zimbabwe?” they ask. They don’t understand a road that is a series of signs, but I know the signs came from my Polish Ancestors, came stamped with approval by those wild-haired, singing, Slavic ones. Though they were not the only Ancestors involved, of course. One does not go to Zimbabwe on the whim of Polish Ancestors. The African Ancestors have to be very involved – instrumental, in fact. The result is that I – like many others in this world – have staked my life on a dream, and still I am watching the result of that gamble. It didn’t feel like it was my gamble. It felt fairly choiceless, yet here I am, no longer caught up in the nightmare of my own life. Here I am, friend to my Spirits now. Here I am, proof that miracles do happen – healthy, whole, healed, and a proper ceremonialist at that.

The Truth is that in my few years on this earth, I have barely learned how to pray.

Here is a Truth hidden in the corner of all of our eyes: if you listen carefully you can hear the thoughts of the trees – with great care, you can hear what is behind the thoughts of the people and you can see them, as if for the first time. And when you hear the thoughts behind the thoughts, you can hear the nature of the thing behind the thoughts, the song that is there, that wraps them up – you can see, if you hear the song. Everything in life is in service to the Road, and if you listen carefully, you can hear the thoughts of the Road, and if you listen very, very carefully, you can hear the nature of the thing behind the thoughts of the Road.

And what, pray, is the mystical nature of love? Tell me the Truth, please, even if it is a difficult one. I often feel like an old woman now, and I would rather – much rather – hear something true, than something impressive.

Yet now, looking back on these years of initiation, something inside of me has grown proud of the route that I chose

to take – even if most of the time I felt I had no choice at all. Looking back, it feels like I spent most of my time somehow under trees, in the mountains – hidden in plain sight, playing the karimba, the mbira, the violin. Now, when I turn my face back to the community I feel must be there, it is my few stories and songs that I have to offer and to give. I have the violin. It is the only thing that can speak for me and not in technique, no, not at all in technique. Violin playing is not a skill, this thing I have relearned. Violin playing is a lesson in listening for the true voice of all creatures. Violin playing is a sacred ceremony.

Let's begin again, this time with another story. Even disconnected and jumbled thoughts of the likes of my own, need a story, after all. I was fasting in a cave in Domboshawa, Zimbabwe. One of those caves in which the bushmen – the San people – left their paintings. I knew very little then about the caves, but I had just emerged from a bout of painful, excruciating, physical fire from my walk with the Ancestors and I owed them an apology. My gut told me that the best way to apologise is to listen carefully, and the best way I have learned to listen is to go into nature and fast. So there I was, fasting, confused about what it was that had happened – pregnancy, being struck down by the fire of the Ancestors, a miscarriage, and their anger on my skin.

This is the thing to understand about us Ceremonialists – we do not make enlightened decisions, no. We follow the veiled language of the Wild Spirited Spirit Ones. We are in constant translation, attentive to the language of the Spirit in our lives. We go where we are called. It is not a bad thing. It is not a choice, either, not a human one. The choice involved is the choice to adhere to our natures. This is why I find the language of “choice” that is currently used in the over-culture of Western society to be deeply flawed: to choose to adhere to my nature, and to choose to follow the voice of my Spirit are the only choices available. They have been the most difficult, and of them, I am the proudest. The problem is that in the thinking of Civilisation, we are not really given the option to choose to act according to our nature; we are given a set of choices and a set of possible and predictable consequences to those choices, and thus we are trapped within a set of paradigms that thinks about life a certain way, only one way. This is not the way the Big Ones

living in the Trees ask us to know ourselves. Thus choice is a tricky, tricky concept. At least it has been for me.

In this case, I chose to go to Domboshawa, outside of Harare, Zimbabwe. But even this choice, please understand, was accommodated for me. When you choose to go into the Wild, into Nature, to the Mountain, to fast, that choice automatically comes by way of invitation by the Spirits who live there. So we must both choose, and in that magic and mystery that is the open road of the Spirit, we choose to go at the same time as they choose to call us. My choice becomes theirs – they are that generous, Those Beautiful Ones for which human language has no tether to give them a worthy enough home.

I found myself in the cave in Domboshawa. By day, I hid as best as I could, so that the few people who came by would not find me there. Still, one of those days a group of school-children came with a guide. I was sitting behind a tree at the edge of the cave, and I caught what the Guide was saying: “the people who drew the paintings on the walls of the cave were *svikiros* or *mashamanas* – (*mashamans* would be the *Shona*-fied way of saying many shamans, or shaman plural). They would go into trance and they would paint the pictures you see here.” The children and the guide left. Shortly afterwards, I found a painted bead in the dirt behind the tree, left there as if for me. (The language of Spirit is ever personal, and fasting in the Wilderness is a place where that deeply metaphorical language hits us most directly – there are no coincidences, and especially not when you are fasting under a tree. It is a way of sharpening our ears, and listening closely.)

Here was my feeling, and I did not at all know this when I first arrived in Zimbabwe: mediumship of the kind that the *Shona* know so well, is why I was called there. A deeper spiritual calling wanted to be told through me, through my body, through my voice, through my perception. Some Spirit called me home to a country perennially rocked by instability, a country where revolution, inflation, fuel and food shortages were quite normal – to a place where family is the central organising principle of life, and where I myself had none. Yet there it was, on the ground, a bead – indicating to me that wearing beads, meaning healing work, was why I was here. My human mind did as many things as it could to the information

to distort it – because it’s never really how we think it will go – but in the end, initiation on all levels is what I went through to find my own true nature, as a ceremonialist. It’s the best I can come up with, in terms of words. Yes, I can call myself a Shaman. Yes, that would be true. Yes, I could call myself a *Svikiro*. Yes, on some level that would be true. Yes, I could call myself a spiritualist, and yes, that would also be true. But Ceremonialist feels best – it is direct, specific, and gives a hint as to the nature of my particular gift. There is no one way to shamanise, no one way to initiate, no one way to talk to God or to Ancestor or to the little people in Nature. But when you have been gripped very hard by the hand of Goddess and finally found your tongue like a lost snake, and when you catch the eye of those Beautiful Big Ones, then you feel in yourself that swell of knowledge – *this is what I am here to do*. And then you want to say something. I certainly do. Then you might finally even have something to say. Or to sing, even. Or maybe they can be the same thing – the song, the story, the word, and the voice. After all, the alchemy of all of them together creates the magic.

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## HARARE AVENUES

The flu should have been expected, but it wasn’t. I thought malaria was more reasonable, but no – Harare is not full of malaria, it is full of the winter flu, and even I – with a thick Polish skin – was not immune.

In fact, as one of my teachers told me, shamans are more likely to fall ill. And they can’t heal themselves. “Ng’anga hazvirapi”, goes the Shona proverb. A shaman – a spiritualist – a healer – cannot heal themselves.

So, here’s the truth about shamans that I learned while I lay in bed, living in a room in the Avenues in Harare, not able to stand up without falling down (this was a first): Shamans get sick, a lot, because they are constantly healing themselves, and the world. Their symptoms mean something. But they won’t tell you about it. Not necessarily.

My dreams then were full of mermaids, and water, and men with knives, and big lions, and there were some dreams



that had me so terrified wanting to wake up, and sleep forever – hallucinating, now, and seeing men with knives come out of the walls and try to stab me. This, I learned, was normal. “The fear has to be shaken out of you, sweated out of you,” said one of my teachers later, in his own ‘dare’, a round hut, surrounded by herbs, sacred cloths, shells, stones, bones, and sacred walking sticks (*tsvimbo*). He gave me herbs and had me sweat more, under a plastic cover.

“You need to sweat with the spirits of the plants.”

My grandmother used to say the same thing. “Sweat it out!” Whenever the fever came haunting. She would pile blankets on my bed and say, “Sweat it out.”

Now here I was, sweating it – sweating everything out, wringing myself out, being wrung out – in Southern Africa, far away from where my grandmother had her sweats.

The fear was illuminating.

“The fear is the first thing that needs to go, and this is the hardest thing,” that is what my teacher said. “The fear is the thing that keeps you from seeing, hearing, intuiting properly. This world is not at all what it seems, and all of us would know this, if we were able to open our eyes... and we would be able to open our eyes, if we could wake up from the FEAR.”

Twisting between sheets, soaked in sweat and tears, I was waking up from fear.

Fear is the hardest thing to overcome after trauma. Trauma severs pieces of you, and then you are deafened, blinded. In so many ways our civilization is simply traumatised – we don’t want to see what truly is. We cut down trees, our allies, our friends. We raze through the Earth with machines, killing. We pretend the dead have nothing to do with us. We think dreams are not real. We call ghosts psychology and try to wave it away with a DSM wand. I don’t want to see anymore, hear anymore, and therefore I don’t want to speak anymore either. Trauma confuses us so that we no longer know what is true, and what is a lie. Trauma cuts off parts of ourselves: our humanity, our intuition, our imagination – and then we hide our heads in the sand, hoping we choke and move on to better things. To be truly brave becomes more and more difficult, not easier. Life more fragile. Plenty is at stake. The fragility of our existence increasingly terrifying.

I wake up again, drenched.

“It is an evil spirit. It will go away,” says my teacher, smiling. Nothing moves him. Nothing worries him. He is a shaman, through and through.

The thing to remember about traditional cultures is that they are extremely pragmatic. People there live difficult lives, and do not engage whole-heartedly in things that do not work, have no effect. To the logic of traditional, earth-based cultures, it is us who are insane, because we are the ones who are obsessed with the idea of “faith in God”. Faith. “Faith in God”, as opposed to “living in faith”, meaning more closely “living in trust”, is an abstract ideal, and it makes no sense. It has no connection with the material world, applying our obsessions with division and separation, “giving to God what belongs to God and giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar” – rather than weaving spirituality into our lives. See, even that statement is absurd. This idea that it is us who choose to weave spirituality into our lives, as though it is a choice, as though life itself is not already a gift from spirit, already flowing joyfully through everything.

One of the things that healers learn early on, is that every healing is a transformation, a grace, a creative act. So healing anything takes a new, creative method, which will be different from what happened last time. Every practitioner and participant of ceremony knows this – that every ceremony is completely different than the one that came before and the one that will come after, even if the protocols, style, tradition, substance, participants and even intention of the ceremony are the same. And because of this, often, approaching a problem that seems to behave in the same way, with solutions that worked before makes no sense to the traditional healer. It’s like the proverbial insanity of repeating the same thing over and over again. The rule, in my experience seems to be – if it worked once before, it will not work again. Granted, I broke my neck on this rule many times – I banged my head against the wall again and again, feeling safe with certain methods, wanting the same results, approaching repeating problems with a clinical objective distance. This is not the way that healing works. It is always a challenge, it is always fresh, it is always a new problem, requiring a new solution – because we are the ones who need to learn something new, something that we did not know before.

In this sense, traditional healing is a process of real learning – learning to be constantly curious, constantly scientific in process. A mystical scientific process of learning, where every time we begin: “I do not know, I do not know, I do not know”. And the prayer, which focuses the request, opens the vessel for love saying: please, show me. Please, be with me. Please, help me.

We are now, all of us; indigenous traditions, and Western people alike, in a new scenario. Division will no longer help any of us. Putting certain ideas, or people, or cultures on pedestals will not help us. We are facing unprecedented problems. All of us praying for fresh, creative solutions, which will come from a grand merging of the problems and the people who carry them. We are all in this together.

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Having survived that dreadful winter, months later, my sister asks me for a clear prayer ritual. Something simple, a basic formula which can help grow her own practice. How shy we are, in conversation with Spirit. How lofty. How much we seek the right words, the right way. We know that in prayer we are seen, and yet we don't know how to be seen. How do we come into intimacy with spirit? Where to begin? We begin in prayer. With that settling of the space, the opening of the sacred place, with a gift. We give gratitude. Then we ask for understanding. We give thanks again. Then we listen. Opening our eyes, our ears, our hearts. “Let me see you. Let me feel you. Be with me, in all things. Hold my hand, hold my heart. Do the same for those who hate me, so they no longer feel the need to hate. Heal the souls of those who have wronged me, so they no longer need to wrong anybody else. You are love. Hold me in the love that you are. Thank you. See you tomorrow. See you today. See you as I walk away from here. You are my love. I am your love.”

“Wow. Truly, in Zimbabwe, you have learned how to pray,” my sister tells me.

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The drums, the dancing and the people. The Ceremony is glorious! Spirit comes, speaks Truth, and Truth is received. My feet dance relief into the earth, because I know, finally, why I am here – my purpose is no longer evasive.

A professor of Anthropology in Poland once said something that made my experience make a little more sense – “Shamans are born with the gift. They are at home in the Spirit world. And when they go there, whether the Spirits are annoyed with them or whether they are having a good time together, what is important is that the shaman is at home there – the Spirits cannot banish the Shaman. They can do that to other people, but not to the shaman. This is the gift that the shaman is born with. It is not a technique.’

As the African stars look down upon me, I know shamans are born, not made. Gifted by spirits, not by people. The fire splits into a bright grin, sending sparks into the air and lighting up the faces of the laughing, singing, dancing people. However, these same Shamans are accepted by people – they must be, in this lifetime, for bridge-building to make sense.

I think this goes a long way to explain the experience of a lot of people on earth these days, as more and more shamans are waking up and being born to compensate for all of the ones that our society either kills, like the colonising cultures did to indigenous traditions or the burnings of witches in Europe or the hunting down and killing of shamans by the Soviet State; that, or they are put away into hospitals and called mad – their visions and callings twisted into the diagnosis of a mental illness.

Shamanism is not a technique. Nobody can teach it to you. But it is a real and necessary thing. A true vocation.

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At the end, this is what my teacher says to me:

“Your Ancestors gave me one message for you – after what we do here, you are done, you must not go to any healers anymore, now you must talk to your spirits direct, most of your communication must be with them. You must trust your

spirits. Because they are directing your work, so it is not your choice – you must come to them with everything, ask them, give yourself time also with every decision. They must tell you now, what to do, where to go. People like you – people who do ritual and ceremony – they do not have stable places to live. Like *Chaminuka*, *Ambuya Nehanda*, they travelled from community to community performing whatever ritual was necessary – not more, not less. Your life partner must understand that, if you get a life partner – if he understands it, it will be good. Understanding is a grace that is given – your parents also, their eyes are closed to your work, but it is not their fault. Their eyes will be opened by the Ancestors. This will happen later. The road of Spirit and the Peacemaker is not easy. You are a messenger of Spirit, an elder – it is good that you are here. Sent by Spirit. Pray to them for everything. When you are born a Svikiro, you can't run away from that. Can you run away from your shadow? It is always following you – for your own good. The Ancestors are messengers from the Creator, they are who we talk to. That being said, Spirit is mysterious. These days people think you just need to buy some cloths, a walking stick and some bute and you are done, but it is not like that. Spirit does not live in cloth. My body is their cloth. They live in the body. Everything must be done with the right heart, with the right intention, and we are human and you do not know what lives in a healer's heart. And we all make mistakes and now I can write a new story without mistakes – your story, the story of your life is also a healing story. ... What else? Travel with medicine, ALWAYS. Tomorrow we start the work. Pray for your enemies, give them gifts, then walk away. We are not sent here to love only nice people or people who like us. Flying is a way of travelling, it is not evil. Neither is having children. Spirit is now knocking on everybody's doors and they must respond now. Not when they have time or later, but now. And we must understand that the language of Spirit also lives in paradox – and mystery. And it is love, it is all love, and we are here to love each other and the Earth also. The Earth needs healing. We need elders to initiate properly. We are given different gifts, we can't all be the same – we are all different, with different gifts.

Take everything to the Ancestors. Everything. They will talk to you.

At night, I see myself, the baby that I was, in a box. The plane takes me high, high, into the night sky. The box becomes a basket. The plane melts away, and the basket flows, floats, along a river of stars. And there they are, those smiling faces of lions, mermaids, people, grandfathers and grandmothers. I am home.



**Art makes it  
possible to  
cross visible  
and invisible  
boundaries**



**KAROLINA BIENIEK**

**URSZULA MARKOWSKA-MANISTA**

**PAULINA BRELIŃSKA-GARSZTKA**

*Art as an Encounter*  
– narrative paths  
of closure and  
opening to the new

*A close up of the perspectives of Fifi Mbogho,  
Samba Yonga, Natasha Omokhodion-  
Kalulu Banda and Lilian Hippolite Mushi*

**Introduction – women  
narrations in and via arts**

Art acts as a transmitter of knowledge, precisely because it “becomes” and is not just an “is” where the new deconstructs the old, it is where humanity borders or co-exists with nature, between “materiality” and “immateriality”, in dialogue. It is helpful in finding connections between the phenomena experienced by humanity in the historical time that encompasses them as well as the historicity of the places they inhabit. It facilitates journeys into the past and the future, providing a space for the discovery, deconstruction and construction of meaning.

What follows are excerpts from the narratives of four women involved in contemporary art in different places and spaces in Africa and Europe. They draw strength in their work from an awareness of the inherent potential of art, its universality and the crossing of borders that enable intercultural and intercontinental exchange. From this perspective, they see art as a tool for developing creative thinking skills and imagination, things which are essential for creating new solutions and bringing about social change. Their methods of discovery are not only via practice as their research but also through digital transformation, which enables the potential to share experiences and perspectives.

For many women involved in pro-social action through art, this art reflects on the one hand on constant questions, the unknown, the dilemmas and challenges of society while, on the other hand, it also takes the form of a multidimensional space in which one can seek answers to their own questions and the questions of others and discuss them locally and internationally.

The voices of women who seek to enrich human potential through contemporary art are becoming increasingly heard. Women are the initiators of practices, interactions and collaborations in the field of contemporary art, creating a framework for encounters aimed at knowledge and artistic exchange.

Their narratives indicate that deconfining only serves as the beginning in the process of discovering, decoding and interpreting meanings. It is a process that initiates the production and reproduction of knowledge and an artistic reflection as to what allows human beings to transcend as well as being causal, active, and participatory. It is a certainty that the following process brings challenges that strengthens the endurance of co-creation in a project.

It is a process of discovering the familiar and at the same time the new, encased in multiple dialogues and different contexts, which shows that by learning different contexts of art, and seeing its potential, it is possible to innovate and join forces to create a stronger contemporary art scene and richer forms of expression. Deconfining also allows indigenous knowledge systems to be restored and their artistic value to be shown.

“Deconfining only serves as the beginning and that in the future, there will be so much more that we can share, including

festivals and more exchange programs rather than just residencies. I think we could even get to a point where we could do curatorial and research residencies, because I believe that we are already somewhat aligned towards this same goal.” (Fifi Mbogho 2023).

In their contributions, they all point to (in their view) important categories that build a path to understanding art. For us, these categories have become the pulsating narrative categories of interdisciplinary inquiry in the field of art. Nothing is predictable in art. It is concerned with living beings, things, the inanimate world, places, spaces, creations and accumulated experiences. Art is also participatory. It is a process, a series of events and experiences in which participation is a source of knowledge, new encounters, dilemmas and challenges. At the same time, it comes with the awareness that once you have experienced art, analysed it, interpreted it, and reflected on it, nothing will ever be the same again. Art makes it possible to cross visible and invisible boundaries.

The history of the world built on power relations shows that, for example, during the processes of conquest and colonisation, many indigenous stories, important layers of knowledge created by women, have been forgotten or uprooted while women have also been erased and left out of key historical narratives.

“If you think of institutions of knowledge and how knowledge is produced – it is written in books, whether it’s papers, whether it’s academic resources and scholarly work – but in our indigenous knowledge systems, a lot of knowledge was documented through art, through storytelling, through our ancestral stories, and a lot of that was invalidated as knowledge. That it was not documented on paper, it was even seen as being much worse – then it’s not even considered a knowledge system” (Samba Yonga 2023).

Today, women are actively and creatively using new technologies, synchronising a multiplicity of forms and styles in an effort to restore women’s contributions to knowledge and integrate them into mainstream and social justice-relevant approaches.

To create, to express oneself through the multiplicity of form (which art has at its disposal) is also to learn different levels of communication and responses to communication in worlds that are often inconsistent and at odds with the familiar

everyday realities in which we have been brought up, as well as with the received education and that with which we identify. Art is therefore a tool for communication and expression. It expresses itself through the sender – the artist – and the recipient – the viewer, the reader – who are co-creators interpreting and reproducing knowledge. They thus participate in an open process of exchanging knowledge, ideas and information, which is an integral part of the process of building relationships with different places and artworks and dealing with cultural, religious, social, environmental, climatic, political and other conditions.

## **Narration 1**

### **TO ENRICH HUMAN POTENTIAL THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART**

My name is Fifi, Fifi Mbogho, from Dar es Salam, Tanzania. I work for an institution called the Nafasi Art Space, which strives to enrich human potential through the medium of contemporary art. Founded by a small group of Tanzanian artists, it is the nation's longest standing independent art centre.

At Nafasi, I manage the Visual Arts Department, which is seen historically as one of the programmes that really take over the entire organisation. In the Visual Arts Department, there are a lot of sub-departments including the Nafasi Academy, which is a programme that we started in 2020, a programme that caters towards enriching aspiring artists and art practitioners into the field of contemporary art. We also have our membership and residency programmes where creatives can collaborate with an inclusive community. Thanks to these, Nafasi has demonstrated the capability of how to facilitate human potential, and how important it is to focus on doing something together. We also have art gallery spaces where group exhibitions are organised every year. Last but not least, we also have our Nafasi Film Club together with the Nafasi Digital Art Lab.

Deconfining is one among the first few programmes ever since I joined Nafasi where there is a presence of intercultural and intercontinental exchange. This type of new collaboration with partners from other countries brings new mediums to test

out in Nafasi. It is important to mention that video is something new in the contemporary art scene in Tanzania; not a lot of people practise it and in the frame of Deconfining, we can develop this branch of art. It will be a really nice opportunity and a really great platform for Tanzanian artists who are interested in exploring and experimenting artistically. Through the intercultural context, we can actually create a much more viable and much stronger contemporary art scene locally, something which is my biggest expectation in international projects in general. It can only bring about artistic growth and more collaboration and partnerships in the future. Taking that into account, I believe that Deconfining only serves as the beginning and that in the future, there will be so much more that we can share, including festivals and more exchange programs rather than just residencies. I think we could even get to a point where we could do curatorial and research residencies, because I believe that we are already somewhat aligned towards this same goal.

Visiting Poland and participating in the Survival Art Review in Wrocław has been a really invigorating experience. I had the chance to see all this new – for me it’s actually new – innovations and the use of technology in art, which is something that in the end we’re still growing. Therefore it’s been really motivational and captivating to see artists’ involvement in the Review, and to see how much work was done by the Survival team. However with new experiences also comes the difficulties I had to face before I crossed the Polish border. Even in the twenty-first century, the visa process was more than complicated. I was not able to get a quick appointment, because, unluckily for me, it was more a question of who it is that you know that can help you do a certain thing, instead of really going through the system. It’s really sad that you are constantly being treated as you are running away from your own country. Even though we had all the documentation prepared in advance, we were interrogated about our whereabouts, where we’re going, and what we’re going to do. But when you get through it, you can also prepare for the unexpected. Maybe the world out there could be kind, some people could be kinder. Taking the approach of not expecting anything is a protection.

I’ll take back with me to Tanzania the representation of art which I had a chance to observe in Poland. In Tanzania we

work in an old warehouse, and initially, our thought is that you have to beautify something in order to make people want to come and see it. But then sometimes it's also about what is the experience you're trying to give to people, the audience, and with the experience of the Survival Art Review, this time using an old streetcar depot, really embracing that history with all its nuances. I believe that this is a very interesting observation, and something that I'll definitely be taking home with me.

## **Narration 2**

### **TO BRING BACK [INDIGENOUS] KNOWLEDGE INTO THE MAINSTREAM AND USE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES TO ARCHIVE THEM**

My name is Samba Yonga and I'm the co-founder of the Women's History Museum in Zambia. We set up the Women's History Museum in 2017 with the mandate to restore indigenous knowledge systems that were created by women. This was necessitated because, during the colonisation process, a lot of the histories, the knowledge that women created and the institutions that had created them, were forgotten, and women were also left out of those narratives. Therefore it was very important for us to bring back the legacy based on the years of experience into the mainstream and use digital technologies to archive them.

If you think of institutions of knowledge and how knowledge is produced – it is written in books, whether it's papers, whether it's academic resources and scholarly work – but in our indigenous knowledge systems, a lot of knowledge was documented through art, through storytelling, through our ancestral stories, and a lot of that was invalidated as knowledge. That it was not documented on paper, it was even seen as being much worse – then it's not even considered a knowledge system. Now we live in a digital age and we saw this as an opportunity to democratise our knowledge system, while also archiving and popularising it and making it legitimate. Our museum is fully digital because we didn't want to wait for an institution that has four walls to then determine how we will start restoring our knowledge systems. The idea of four walls

for a museum is a very westernised and Eurocentric thought of knowledge production. We never had four walls in our communities when we are practicing knowledge in the time when we are keeping our knowledge or when we are transmitting our knowledge, and we didn't feel it necessary to do that in order for us to start the work. The digital age has provided us with tools and platforms to do the same kind of work and leapfrog the idea of a brick-and-mortar building for us to be able to do the work that we're doing. This has seen us being catapulted into areas such as spaces of scholarly work such as art as well as technology. That wouldn't have happened if we had waited to build a building. For example, you can get to know the stories of Leading Ladies, a project available on our website depicting seventeenth and nineteenth century Zambian women who held significant positions of leadership. These stories challenge the idea that historically, women were not capable of being leaders. It is a widely available artefact to listen to what the museum has created without actually visiting Lusaka physically.

I think what has happened with the kind of work that we're doing – we work, in a way, on the fringes and on the periphery, but then we've created a huge space of debate in terms of centring knowledge systems, centring ideas around how collaboration should be done. Knowledge production, in a way, has only been one way. We've understood how knowledge has been produced – you go to university, a policy is created, you follow a certain path – and I think the Deconfining project is something that's interrogating that. It's interrogating the idea of how structures of collaboration and working in a cultural space look like, who they benefit and who they implicate in a harmful or a good way. This fell in line with exactly the work that we were doing, and we felt that we could provide a valuable voice, a valuable platform, for these conversations, debates and controversies to take place.

My passport expired in April and if you look at my old passport, it's filled with visas from everywhere, as I travel quite a lot for the work that we do for the museum and other work, and at this point you think that I've gotten used to the visa process. Nevertheless every time I go through it, I encounter an obstacle – because there's always a gatekeeping process to entering a space where you are, in a sense, going to exchange

something – as we are always considered as a lesser partner or a lesser entity that’s entering a space of privilege. This places our value at a lower space, and these are some of the things that we want to challenge and kind of interrogate around the idea of what exchange is. Because if you’re talking about exchange, it should be on an equal platform: you’re not doing me a favour, I’m not doing you a favour. We’re both bringing things of value, and it follows that access to those things should be at an equal space. However, we have to jump through hoops and, you know, cross rivers, in order for us to be able to get in, even into those spaces where we can have those discussions. The only reason why I was given a visa is because they saw the evidence of the visas that I’d had, so they’re like, “Oh, she’s probably low risk, we can give her the visa without putting her through a lot of hassle.” Even in that, I still had to pay the cost of taking the visa to another country and bringing it back to my country and literally waiting on the day that I was supposed to fly to the passport office to pick up my passport and travel. Thus the passport is such an important document of identity – what if it gets lost on the way? What if somebody takes my passport and uses the identity? They never think of those things, to them it’s like a privilege that you are even able to give us your passport and that we’re even getting it and putting a visa in it. These are some of the things that are not considered that continue to perpetuate this inequality in a so-called equal collaboration. Normally, they won’t even tell you, first of all a thousand disclaimers, so it usually takes three weeks to process and it has to go to another country. I’m based in Lusaka in Zambia. The passport had to go to Nairobi in Kenya, and then they take fifteen days and after that they say – even then, they’ll say a disclaimer, even if we say fifteen days, it might take longer if we feel you don’t meet the initial or appropriate qualifications for you to get a visa. By the way, they take your passport and it means that you can’t travel anywhere else, you have to wait at home, so if you’ve got work somewhere else or you need to travel somewhere else, you have to wait for those three weeks to end for you to get your passport back. Even if you get it back, it’s not certain that you will get the visa. Where is the equality in that? And yet if you look at it in the reverse way, most European countries and other



territories, they just come into Africa without needing a visa or they get a visa at the entry point and nobody says anything.

It is my first time in Wrocław and Poland. I've never been here before, my dad was a diplomat in Eastern Europe and London and Italy, so it reminds me a lot of Serbia and Croatia in just the way it feels, but I've also felt very comfortable and it's an open space to meet new people. It's always great to meet new ideas and you find there are parallels in many areas that you wouldn't think exist, and it's been exciting to be a part of huge, important discussions.

I mean, as always with these kinds of projects, they remind me of the development sector – where I have a background, and the huge ambition of the development sector to end poverty. I mean, I don't know if it will ever happen in this lifetime, and so we do all these things, implementing all these institutions and projects and processes and this Deconfining collaboration kind of feels the same way as the aim of ending poverty – in creating networks and exchanges that will create this magnificent way of collaborating together. I'm hopeful, but I foresee there will still be a lot of reverting to type, like you get used to a certain way, you've been indoctrinated and taught and the way the process is supposed to go, and we will face resistance, we will face conflict, but that's part of the process and I think it should happen, because if one side acquiesces and the other side is not saying anything, then we just go back to business, so I think we should have the courage to go through this difficult process, because it will be.

### **Narration 3**

THE GOOD THING IS THAT WE  
KNOW THAT, RIGHT  
SO NOW WE HAVE TO SEE HOW  
BEST TO BRIDGE THINGS

My name is Natasha Omokhodion-Kalulu Banda and I'm an author and also the founder of Copper Monstera, which is a new publishing firm that I've started in Zambia, Central Africa.

I wrote one published novel entitled ,”No Be From Hia”; another one is about to be published soon. My short stories have been featured in various pan-African anthologies, for example “Short Story Day” was part of “Door of No Return”, released in Africa in 2018 for and has been translated into Portuguese for the Brazilian Journal *Periferias*.. Recently, one was published in the United States by HarperCollins Publishers. When I first started this journey, I found that it was very difficult to get to know what to do with the stories that I wrote. So I’d write this stuff and it had nowhere to go. I was fortunate enough to begin to find sort of collaborations that were happening around the continent. In fact, the first one I ever did, that I shared, was a call for an anthology in Zambia by our Women Writers Association. It validated my experience as an author and I realised that there was a gap, there was still more that we could do for other writers who were in a position such as myself – to get them published, to get them out there and get their work through the professional process, to get it out to industry. I haven’t published any other authors yet. I’ve been fortunate enough to publish my own work, which has gone on to other markets – South Africa, Canada, while one is due to come out in the UK this September (ed. 2023) – but I would like to do that with many other artists who were in the same position that I was just a few years ago. It’s very important to participate in anthologies or any cross-collaborations which can empower a young artist who has no possibilities to send their work.

With every new collaboration that we embark on, it’s always new, so the best part is it is fresh. No one’s done it before, so you get to do it for the first time together, in the sense that it’s the first time you are working together on something from scratch. This is what actually happens now, in the context of the Deconfining project. Always it starts with at least the same intention, the same motivation, while the practical side of it will always bring challenges that we have to overcome together as co-authors and initially, I think, depending on your mindset or your beliefs. Everyone’s coming from what they already know, right, so everyone’s coming from a place – perhaps of a little bit of resistance, because what they know is correct, or what is in their region is perhaps different from the perspective of the other that you’re working with. It is the biggest advantage that comes from intercontinental initiatives. It makes us all richer as

researchers and people. Support for any kind of cross-collaborations is crucial. Involved authors on this side of the world know barely nothing about the other side of the world. The good thing is that we have to see how best to bridge things, and I guess it gives us a chance to expand our knowledge and create a new perspective.

With the difficulties which a collaboration like this can bring, I would start from the challenge of becoming aligned. You already have a common goal, that's great, but how do we align our values? Do we align the way we work, the way we communicate, the way we produce what we intend to? Overcoming that together makes it ours, in fact creating institutional knowledge of how to collectively write.

Alongside the fact that I require a visa and are forced to arrive at the Survival Art Review, I have to admit that I'm a dual national, so I don't have visa problems at the moment. I can speak from the point of view of having experienced both sides of the fence, not being able to move freely and then suddenly being able to. I don't think we're in the same place that we were forty or thirty years ago, even ten years ago. I think even things like the pandemic show us that we could need each other depending on where in the world you are – it doesn't matter where you are – you may need refuge with us, we may need refuge with you. We should remember it, above all these bureaucracy connected with crossing borders.

The Survival Art Review was exciting, different. It's my first time in this part of Europe, and it's always eye-opening to learn something new from the experience of other artists. It's steeped in history, just where we are, our location, the way you do things different from how we do. My mind already is like, "Oh I think we could sort of replicate this". Interestingly I also find connections and inspiration from the archives and connections between Zambia and Poland. In the last book that I've just written, I had to do a lot of research on the Zambian independence story, which takes place, in terms of research, anything between the 1940s and 1964, and quite interestingly there's quite a lot of information about Polish refugees who came to what was Northern Rhodesia. I found information about villages existing in the past that they set up for them to stay in both countries, I think in Tanzania and Zambia. So for me there's always been

that connection that I wonder what would happen if we were to share that or discuss it or look for those Polish families. As a consequence, from a historical point of view, it's interesting to be here, having that knowledge sort of in the back of my mind.

## **Narration 4**

### **THE ECOSYSTEM OF THE ART WORLD HAS GAPS IN ITSELF**

My name is Lilian Hippolite Mushi, I'm the Nafasi Art Space director, based out in Dar es Salam, Tanzania. Nafasi was established in 2007 by a group of artists and academics and professors who really just needed a space to come together to create. So that was grassroots and then in 2008 it was formalised and registered as an NGO. Therefore from that time, they could apply for funding and initiate projects. Nafasi is a Swahili word which has two meanings: it means space, so there's a huge space that artists can come and work, but it also means opportunity and chance. Mostly we support emerging artists, visual and performing artists, as well as youth and underprivileged creators. Part of our programming includes what we established as the Nafasi Academy, an alternative curriculum to training cultural sector representatives. We have three galleries – a permanent one, a rotating one and a public gallery – and then on the visual side again, we have a residency program, whereby every October we have a call for residential artists and we really encourage international artists to apply. We also support performing art, musicians, dancers and DJs. Recently we've established the Digital Academy and the Film Club. to do short experimental films.

I have an artistic background, I graduated painting and sculpture. I went to London to study, and then when I was there I asked myself: am I going to survive as an artist? After coming back to Tanzania I worked as a designer for a while, user experience designer, business designer, doing marketing and strategy. After the pandemic I opened my own company doing design services. It's hard to convince corporations to do that but, you know, we figured out a way. So when I got out of the job and got into my own studio, I started to think about how can I go back

to the art world, to culture. I don't practice art professionally as of now, I do it just for myself, but I'm starting to figure out how I could be of service to the art industry in Tanzania, which is very young. Coincidentally, the Nafasi role opened up.

For us it's a great opportunity, for my artists – I call them my artists – because we often have trouble securing residency opportunities outside of Tanzania, outside of Africa rather from a formal perspective, especially getting visas. All kinds of exchanges are important to be developed and continued for the future of arts and by having such a partnership like with Deconfining, it gives me so much joy. I'm actually looking forward to going through this process and to facilitating the artists coming to Poland and of course the other way around.

For me in Tanzania specifically, our artists have several problems which are quite basic. Firstly, access to general education, that's a problem for our artists, hence the Academy that we've established. Secondly, the ecosystem of the art world has gaps in itself – so you have artists, but you don't have creators or arts managers, therefore artists just exist and produce and after that, they don't know what to do. As a consequence, we want to close that gap, which means that we have to deal with another problem that we have with our artists, such as an exposure to new domestic and international markets, and in order to serve that aim in the digital space we have created an app available in the App Store. You can buy art there produced by our artists at Nafasi. Seeing our work and the shows that we produce is available on our website [nafasiartspace.org](http://nafasiartspace.org) or on the Google Arts and Culture platform, in that capacity we try to just give those digital platforms to artists, so they have access to new markets, to other artists, to new information and the art world itself (focussing on the digital sphere of it).

Another challenge I would say that we have to deal with is the idea that they can even live and make a living with art. In order to reach that aim, you can train and have a brilliant mind of a person, however perseverance and mentorship is something that is lacking within the artistic community, which results in artists easily giving up and going on to do something else. Through Digital Lab, what we're also trying to do is experiment with mediums of conserving art. Some of the things that we are trying to fundraise for are 3D scanners and 360 cameras

so people can visualise and can have access to exhibitions in real time. We have recently finished a partnership with a professor who does 3D printing, just to teach these new mediums to artists in order that they can then preserve and show their work differently. Of course there are people who have an interest in AI as well, but that's a separate conversation that we also need to grasp first.

First of all, the Deconfining project will take the form, even for us, of a process of learning, the same way in which digital art was established as an experiment. I'm hoping, from the engagement with the artist, and of course from the partners of Deconfining, that work from the artists will arise due to it. In addition I hope that it also takes the form of a framework of how we can further our Digital Lab. It's fantastic to have the space and all this technology, but if the artists themselves don't have an interest in it, my biggest worry is whether or not I will have artists who are interested enough to want to use the spaces. However, we will hopefully gain some momentum, especially with the younger ones, the upcoming emerging artists.

I am lucky that I visited Poland, because the process I went through was long but successful in the end. The final stage of the visa process is that you have to book an appointment and fill out a form and you go. However, that appointment button never works, it never worked for four weeks. Every single day either I or my colleague would check to see whether any appointments are available. In the end, initially I had emailed the consul directly myself, right, and I didn't get any response. We contacted Karolina to help us to finalise the whole process from the floor of relationships with the Tanzanian consulate. I was annoyed, already traumatised, explaining "Guys, I'm not trying to attack anything, I'm not going there for anything wrong, this is like a project, an important project, right? An important project not only for Tanzanian artists but also for Polish artists, it's an important exchange program." Some of the questions were so shocking for me – "Are you recognised?" – they asked – "Do people from Poland find you being recognised?" – they kept asking. I'm recognised in my family, I'm recognised in my organisation, I'm recognised in my country as a person too, as a human. Finally, we successfully received the visa but some additional difficulties appeared at the airport. We went through

the immigration process for about half an hour of questioning – “What are we doing?” “Where are we going?” “Where is this letter?” “Where are we staying?” “Who is taking you there?” “Why are you going there?” “Why is it important?” and I’m like, “I simply just want to go and experience Poland, just as a cultural worker and this type of exchange is important.” I know it’s not always perfect, I know that visa processes and international co-operation are not always perfect. It still needs to develop appropriate mechanisms of action (especially since there are few of them, and intercontinental cultural projects are something new for my country), but we cannot always go on with “The cross-border system and authorities are just like that,” right? It shouldn’t be like that. But yeah, it’s been a complicated experience to arrive in Poland.

Just before we came, we opened an exhibition at Nafasi, where we spent about a week preparing a perfect white wall, four walls of pure whiteness to hang our work on the wall. Then we came here to see the Survival Art Review happening in the space of a streetcar depot. It’s exciting. I took back to Nafasi the idea to take the space as it is, it does not have to or should be placed on shiny walls. It’s nice, it’s clean, but it doesn’t change anything nor provoke very much conversations. I think it opens up oneself to a new audience that you can gather. That means embracing where we are, how we are, and the space that we operate in – that’s what I’d really like to take back with me as a lesson.

## **Art as an encounter – pulsating categories in narratives**

In the narratives above, art emerges as an encounter that enables a new experience and an opening to the new by embracing where we are, who we are and the (natural, contextual) space in which we operate. The multitude of forms of communication at our disposal today, such as by using the space of former factories or public buildings as an artistic backdrop, and doing something opposite, like creating a digital museum in unphysical spaces or using digital technologies to archive knowledge, allows one, on the one hand, to enter the paths of closing what

was and constitutes cultural heritage and, on the other hand, to open oneself up to the new in the space of the old (loaded with myth, legend, history of former splendour). By popularising and legitimising in the digital age, photographs, collages, street art, literature, video art and symbols reach almost every corner of the world and carry the message of sharing knowledge through art. “The digital age has provided us with tools and platforms for us to do the same kind of work and leapfrog the idea of a brick-and-mortar building for us to be able to do the work that we’re doing.” Samba

The age of the internet, digitalisation and artificial intelligence mean that artists and their creations are free to cross borders, move, exchange and engage in dialogue even when they remain at home. Art that is open to experimentation, spreading across the real and virtual worlds, does not accept any chains. On the contrary, it is a medium – a transmitter of freedom and an opportunity for the development of the artist and the audience. It conditions not only the process of learning and gaining useful knowledge of others and their worlds, but also of refining what is already there and adding what is missing and deconstructing it through narratives, technology and space.

Art takes place anew in digital spaces, using apps, 3D scanners, 360 cameras and digital and online platforms, giving people access to exhibitions in real time or enabling them to read and comment on literary texts and polemized with authors.

The contemporary art world ecosystem is one of multiplicity, diversity and deconfining, through which artists represent being and non-being, the world and the universe, nature and culture, the visible and the invisible. In the narratives above, art is the creation of connections as well as a category of community that allows for (co)participation and the empowerment of young artists and creators. In this way, the role of art encapsulates the eternal truth that we are all an interconnected world, and this interconnectedness permeates all dimensions of existence (Morton 2010).

However, to ensure the encounter, one should not forget about all the obstacles mentioned in the cited narrations. Currently neither equality nor equity is a rule in EU/ropean – African cultural relations. Therefore it is the Deconfining project’s aim to bring the question about fairness of today’s



situation to a broader discussion (Mlandu, 2023). To cite one of the authors in this narration: „if you’re talking about exchange, it should be on an equal platform: you’re not doing me a favour, I’m not doing you a favour. We’re both bringing things of value and therefore access to those things should be at an equal space.”

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Interview with Samba Yonga, *Interviews summarizing the residency in Poland June 2023 during 21<sup>st</sup> Survival Art Review*, Wrocław, 2023.



# Biographies

**Urszula Markowska-Manista**, PhD – researcher in the area of education and childhoods in culturally diverse environments, conducting interdisciplinary fieldwork in a variety of contexts (the Horn of Africa, Central Africa, Central & Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus). Her work draws on inclusive and participatory approaches, decolonial methodologies, interclusion, ‘difficult knowledge’ and sensitive topics. She has been active in the social sciences for two decades, implementing international projects and holding positions at universities in Poland and Germany. From 2016–2021 she was a director (FU Berlin 2016) and co-director (2017–2021 FH Potsdam) of the international MA Childhood Studies and Children’s Rights (MACR) programme and from 2017–2018 a head of the UNESCO Janusz Korczak Chair at the Maria Grzegorzewska University. She is currently a researcher and assistant professor at the University of Warsaw (Faculty of Education). Among her publications are books, including *Konkultura: Wymiary uczestnictwa w kulturze młodych imigrantów z Ukrainy w Polsce* (co-author, 2020) and *Non-inclusive education in Central and Eastern Europe: comparative studies of teaching ethnicity, religion and gender* (co-editor, 2022) as well as articles in journals and book chapters for Sage, Routledge, Springer and others. She is the regional editor of Bloomsbury Publishers on the subject of Childhood and Youth. In 2015, she received *Polityka* award for her academic activity.

**Natasha Omokhodion-Kalulu Banda** is a Zambian of Nigerian and Jamaican heritage. Her short stories have featured in various publications, including ‘Short Story Day Africa 2018’ for *Door of No Return*, which was translated into Portuguese for Brazilian Journal ‘Periferias’. Her latest short story, *Her Sweetie, Her Sugarcane* has been released in Harper Via’s anthology ‘Reflections’. She is an alumni of Curtis Brown Creative’s Breakthrough Course for Black Writers, and an MA candidate in Creative Writing at Kingston University London. Her first book *No Be From Hia* was selected as a Graywolf Africa Press finalist in 2019. Published in Zambia, it has gone on to markets

in South Africa, Canada, and is due for release in the UK by Legend Press. She has served the Afritondo Prize judging panel in 2022, and is a Board Member of Alliance Française of Lusaka.

**Karolina Bieniek** is Director of the ART TRANSPARENT Foundation, Doctor of Social Sciences, a specialist in foreign policy and cultural diplomacy. She has experience in organising work and managing projects with a value of EUR 2+ million, including dozens of cultural and social ventures of regional, national and international scope. Her special focus is on building sustainable European-African relations. She co-organised events as part of the European Culture Congress and co-authored Wrocław's application in the 2016 European Capital of Culture competition. Graduate of the TANDEM international programme for cultural managers and the BASECAMP Eastern Europe & Central Asia 2021 School of System Change, winner of the "30 Creative Wrocławians 2017" competition, member of the Central Europe Coordination Group of the Bosch Alumni Network from 2021 to 2023. Awarded the Bronze Cross of Merit by the President of the Republic of Poland for her activities in the promotion of culture and art.

**Paulina Brelińska-Garsztka** holds a master's degree in curating and promoting art institutions and a bachelor's degree in art criticism and art promotion from the University of Arts in Poznań. A freelance independent art critic and curator of a group, solo or international exhibitions (Lia Kimura, Arnis Aleinikovas, Laura Adel) as well as artist residencies. She collaborated with national and international cultural institutions regarding organizing the exhibitions, conferences, symposiums and workshops eg. MBWA Leszno, Galeria Sztuki Wozownia, Kaunas Biennial. A member of CBA Collective (together with Zofia Reznik and Zofia Małkiewicz) focusing on artistic research perspectives in Central Europe. An international projects coordinator in Wrocław Institute of Culture being responsible for artist in residence programme and international projects. An author of texts published in *Magazyn SZUM*, *Notes na 6 Tygodni*, *e-Czas Kultury*, *Zeszyty Artystyczne*, *Format*, *Artluk*, *Rynekisztuka.pl* and *XIBT Magazine*.

**Kamil Kawalec** is a cultural animator, author of texts, cultural expert. Curator and coordinator of meetings and musical events. Co-founder and editor of ZAKŁAD magazine. Two-time recipient of the artistic scholarship of the Mayor of Wrocław for the promotion of culture and literature. Nominated for the WARTO 2021 Award for the anthology *Reguły Gry*, dedicated to the young poetic community of Wrocław. Finalist of the 10<sup>th</sup> competition of the Duży Format Foundation (2022) for a debut, which resulted in the publication of the poetry book *Wieża Gabba*.

**Shilika Chisoko** is an author, currently pursuing a Masters in English Studies at Stellenbosch University. Her research focuses on contemporary Zambian women's short fiction and online subcultures. She is particularly interested in the ways in which individuals represent themselves online and challenge dominant narratives.

**Chiteu Kasongo** is the founder of EasyZambia, an initiative empowering youth for sustainable development in Livingstone, Zambia's tourist capital. Its main focus is to promote environmental literacy and conservation in line with UN SDG 13: Climate Action. EasyZambia uses different channels – presentations, poetry, drama and art – to raise awareness about climate change and biodiversity protection.

**Karolina Marcinkowska** is an anthropologist (PhD – University of Warsaw, Poland), since 2007 professionally involved in anthropological research, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa (recent topics: anthropology of the body and pre-colonial history of Rwanda) and cross-cultural education (founder of the AFRICA REMIX initiative – <https://africaremix.wordpress.com/>), project co-ordinator at the Foundation for Polish Science, lecturer at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology in Warsaw, the Institute of Intercultural Studies in Cracow, the Open University and many other cultural institutions. She worked as a curator at the Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève, at the Museum of Ethnography in Warsaw, as well as at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw (residence of the Senegalese artist El Hadji Sy) and at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (exhibition *After Year Zero. Universal Imaginaries – Geographies of*

*Collaboration*). She is involved in humanitarian and educational projects: recently in Rwanda, Ghana (Polish Humanitarian Aid), Kenya, Madagascar (doctoral research).

**Dr Mwaka Siluonde** holds a PhD in English from the University of the Free State in South Africa through a Humanities Merit Bursary. She holds a Bachelor of Arts with Education and a Masters of Arts in Literature from the University of Zambia. She taught English and Literature at secondary school level for four years before joining Mulungushi University, where she teaches English Literature and Media Studies. As a researcher, lecturer and creative writer, her interests revolve around Zambia and African post-coloniality in literature, culture and the arts. She is particularly interested in conversations on decolonisation, cultural identity, women, orality, transnationality, migration and dialogue between the past and the present. She is passionate about re-imagining archival, indigenous narratives and historical narratives to create stories that she believes are crucial to fostering cultural identity and unity.

**Suzyika Nyimbili** is a doctoral research fellow at the University of the Free State in South Africa, founder of the Hub Theatre Company in Zambia and a 2018 Mandela Washington Fellow. His doctoral research centres around cultural capabilities, higher education and human development. Suzyika is also a playwright and theatre maker with a keen interest in researching and creating performances around African history, politics and memory.

**Klara Ana Rosa (Wojtkowska)** is a musician, director, writer, storyteller/actor, teacher and traditional ceremonialist. Her work revolves around ceremony-ritual theatre, cooking music, wisdom and visions to create new and living stories and ceremonies. She is the founder of Mhondoro Dreams Productions, which produced the Polish-Zimbabwean film *NZARA-HUNGER* in 2020 – screened at the prestigious Gdynia Film Festival in Poland in 2021. She is the author of *Wild Medicine: A Journey to Zimbabwe*, *Ceremony Theatre: Mystical Texts for the Human and Non-Human Worlds*, *Będziemy się za was Modlić: z Polski do Zimbabwe* *Ścieżkami Przodków*, *Teatr Ceremonii: Opowieści dla Ludzi i Przodków*

and various music albums, including *Moon Songs for Elephants* and *BANGIZA 1+2*. Her work builds a bridge between Zimbabwe and Poland and beyond, and she is also the director of the annual mythological Nyamatsatse Festival. More at: [www.nyamatsatsefestival.org](http://www.nyamatsatsefestival.org) and [www.klaraanarosa.org](http://www.klaraanarosa.org).

<b>PUBLISHER</b>	Art Transparent Fundacja Sztuki Współczesnej ul. Ofiar Oświęcimskich 1/2, 50-069 Wrocław fundacja@arttransparent.org www.arttransparent.org
<b>CO-PUBLISHER</b>	Pro Progressione Kft.
<b>TITLE</b>	Narratives of Closeness and Distance from Central-Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Africa – a Multicontextual Patchwork
<b>EDITORS</b>	Urszula Markowska-Manista, Natasha Omokhodion-Kalulu Banda
<b>AUTHORS</b>	Karolina Bieniek, Paulina Brelińska-Garsztka, Shilika Chisoko, Chiteu Kasongo, Kamil Kawalec, Karolina Marcinkowska, Urszula Markowska-Manista, Mwaka Siluonde, Nyimbili Suzyika, Klara Wojtkowska
<b>PROOFREADING</b>	Ian Maloy
<b>TRANSLATION</b>	Karol Waniek
<b>GRAPHIC DESIGN</b>	Oleg Šuran
<b>COPYRIGHTS</b>	cc by-nc-nd 4.0 deed
<b>ISBN</b>	978-83-960088-7-9  Wrocław 2023



## PARTNERSHIP

Pro Progression (Hungary),  
ART TRANSPARENT (Poland),  
Nafasi Art Space (Tanzania),  
Women's History Museum (Zambia)

## CO-FINANCING NOTES

Project “Deconfining arts, culture and policies in Europe and Africa (deconfining)” co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (eacea). Neither the European Union nor eacea can be held responsible for them.

The task entitled “Deconfining Arts, Culture and Politics in Europe and Africa” has been co-financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage from the Culture Promotion Fund – a state purpose fund, as part of the Promesa dla Kultury programme.

## SUPPORTED BY

members of Bosch Alumni Network



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Arts, Culture & Policies  
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Ministerstwo Kultury  
i Dziedzictwa Narodowego



Bosch Alumni  
Network

The Bosch Alumni Network is a cooperation between









This publication hopes to develop a more comprehensive understanding and theorization of the connections and distances in experiencing, thinking and telling about closer and more distant worlds whose places and spaces reveal their artistic, scientific, and literary potential. We are looking for unique narratives that de-orient, decolonize and bring knowledge and practice closer.

2023