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The South African short story and its mediation of the hegemonic tendencies of nationalism

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Chapter One

"Image and Text[1] in the Stories[2] of Joël Matlou"

This chapter discusses the mediation of black depersonalisation in Joël Matlou's stories. It is submitted, in line with Njabulo Ndebele's notion of the "ordinary", that Matlou draws on oral tradition: on specific philosophical postures or '*back-texts*' that are evident in the Northern Sotho and Setswana languages to develop expedient tactics to loosen the terror of apartheid. This argument also analyses a number of the images and drawings that appear in his short story collection, and a collection of sketches that had not been published until 2002.

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In 1980, on 11 July, Joël Matlou wrote a letter to *Staffrider* magazine requesting the editor to publish his story, *The Struggles*: "Please I want to read my story in the staffrider so I can learn more and more." In the same letter, Matlou, writing in his characteristically error-sprinkled style, asks that his photograph be published with the story: "Send The staffrider with The struggles please. Appeared my photo in my story."[3]

Matlou's appeal to have his photograph published next to (or in) his story raises interesting questions about the relationship between text, image and how the author wishes to be seen. For Matlou, both media – story and photograph – play a role in his public self-presentation. The activity of projecting the self, then, for Matlou involves both text and image. Indeed, this 'dual medium' was to characterize all his work, and his

[1] An earlier version of this chapter appeared as "Image and Text in the Stories of Joël Matlou," *English Studies in Africa: Popular Literature and Publics in Africa*, (Vol.45, No.2, 2002), pp.13-32.

[2] Joël Matlou, *Life at Home and other stories*, (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1991).

[3] Joël Matlou, Letter to Staffrider, n.d. The original letter is now in the possession of Matlou's family, Mabopane (Pretoria North).

manuscripts[4] are all filled with large drawings. Some of these images have made their way into his published work but these represent only a small percentage of the total number available. In addition, the sketches chosen for publication are often broadly realistic and are clearly intended as illustrations of the accompanying text. The decision to publish these drawings appears to be solely the editor's. Many of his images are however far from realistic, and obviously stand in a more complex relationship to the text than simply offering a straightforward illustration.

There is currently a small but growing body of scholarship on Matlou, but it has focused exclusively on his words and not his images. It is clear from even a brief look at Matlou's manuscripts that these images play a central part in his aesthetic enterprise. One way to read these images is via Matlou's concern with the fact that drawing seems to emerge for him as an extended form of writing. Writing is of course only a modernist form of self-empowerment the material processes of which often become invisible. Matlou makes these phenomena visible and, in so doing, provides a way of reflecting on his own preoccupation as an artist absorbed also in examining how images of oppression are mediated to the oppressed. By engaging with these social practices of struggle and negotiation, Matlou attempts to develop a set of strategies through which to 'speak' against the categories of oppression that beset him and other differently marginalised black people.

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In the introduction to Matlou's collection of short stories, *Life at Home and Other Stories*, Mike Kirkwood describes how he first encountered Matlou's manuscript.

[4] The editor of Matlou's short stories, Andries Oliphant, has kept Matlou's original manuscripts on behalf of the Congress of South African Writers. In addition to the first drafts of these published stories, there are over 20 drawings. The pictures (which are originally partly in colour) are reproduced with the permission of the Matlou's family who are now in possession of all these drawings.

Kirkwood describes receiving "soft-covered exercise books of the old quarto-sized standard issue…Whenever [Matlou] laid down his pen he would record the time in the margin. The pen, an ordinary retractable blue Bic, is etched in my mind by its unique ordinariness, its terrifying mildness, its acutely serendipitous way of snaring truth and beauty in casual longhand loops". Kirkwood continues: "Matlou is not unaware of what his pen can do. In one of the many drawings to be found in his manuscripts, the pen, erect and unassisted, hovers over the last word it has written and questions the emptiness of the unwritten page."[5]

What obviously and most immediately captures Kirkwood's attention is the materiality of the book and the writing itself – the quarto-sized exercise book, the distinctive handwriting with its longhand loops, the time written in the margins, the interweaving of image and drawing, the representation of the pen reflecting on the linguistic representations that its "original" has produced. Even from Kirkwood's brief description, it is clear that Matlou has produced a manuscript that enacts a set of writing and literary practices which stand outside of, but comment on, the 'normal' hegemonically – sanctioned conventions of literary production. For example, the time written in the margin of his scripts makes apparent that Matlou is anchoring himself within a specific form of alertness against the apartheid system that defined him as a migrant doomed to a kind of politically induced schizophrenia. Matlou therefore reminds us of the much-vaunted relationship between literacy and modernity.[6] At one level, Matlou's writing appears directly linked to industrially measured time. However, at the same time, the

[5] Mike Kirkwood, Introduction, *Life at Home and other stories*, by Joël Matlou p.7.

[6] See, for instance, Liz Gunner's "Dislocation, Memory & Modernity: The Prophet Isiah Shembe & the Search for Voice & Space," *African Modernities: Entangled Meanings in Current Debates*, Jan-George Dutch, et al. eds., (Portsmouth, NH.: James Currey Ltd., 2002), pp.67-84.

industrial tempo in the margin throws into stark relief the mythical and complex orders of remembered time recorded in the words of the stories. The supposed ability of literacy to confirm Matlou's sense of self-awareness is therefore graphically thrown into question. Likewise, the normal boundaries between text and image are up-ended as drawings intrude into the space of the text, accentuate the entanglement out of which Matlou is responding to apartheid, and, furthermore, comment on how he produces his literature. Matlou's realism makes him conceptualise his predicament as a migrant from the perspectives that visualise victory. This process, generally made invisible and seemingly mysterious, is brought to the fore.

(It is not this thesis' intention to examine Matlou's art as magic realist as popularised in the West and in Latin America. Matlou could not have known of the formal stylistic features of this mode as he had received formal education only up to the level of Standard Seven when he passed away in 1991. It is improbable that he conceptualised his experimentation with the story as an attempt to escape any form of realism, that is, as seen by the proponents of magic realism in the early 1900s. In other words, he did not consider his style of writing as an avant-garde "international commodity" that made him "reestablish contact with traditions temporarily eclipsed by the mimetic constraints of nineteenth-and twentieth-century realism".[7] As already stated in the 'Introduction' to this study, the experimentation with the extraordinary in Matlou's fiction is consistent with the phenomenon of self-reclamation that Apartheid attempts to violate.)

This mode of writing which contemplates its own forms of production provides a useful entry into the existing scholarship on Matlou. Geertsema, for example, has argued that

[7] Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s", *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), p.2.

Matlou's stories are ironically reminiscent of the South African "plaasroman" in which the voice of the 'other' is inserted.[8] However, Geertsema continues, Matlou's text is not a mere reversal of the Afrikaans "plaasroman" where, following J.M. Coetzee, reversal amounts to the mystification that is similar to the earlier "white" dominant order.[9] Drawing on Tony Morphet,[10] Geertsema maintains that contrary to Njabulo Ndebele who allegedly "boxes" the writer into the nationalist project, Matlou, in fact, exceeds Ndebele's assumed nationalist restriction by narrating from what Morphet regards as an "'extraordinarily self-aware, disordered consciousness' [that] employ[s] a profoundly reflexive authorial strategy."[11]

Matlou's "self-aware but [so-called] disordered consciousness" can be understood as arising also from a contemplation of the relationship that he develops between writing and drawing. One insight into this process emerges from a drawing which shows a bespectacled visage of what seems to be his father's employer (figure 2). Reflected in his spectacles is a man (perhaps Matlou's father) pushing a wheelbarrow. In the framed perception of the farmer, he 'sees' only a worker, an image in turn returned to the worker. What, then, does the worker make of this image? Like the language that Matlou manipulates, the pair of spectacles becomes an agency through which he achieves insight into the complex mediation of images of depersonalisation.

This idea of intervened perception is also apparent in another image, "PARK SLEEPERS ARE ON THE INCREASE" (figure 1). In this image, a man in a drunken stupor is

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[8] Johan Geertsema, "Irony and Otherness: A Study of Some Recent South African Narrative Fiction," Unpublished PhD., University of Cape Town, 1991, p.163.

[9] Op. cit., p.164.

[10] Tony Morphet, "Ordinary — Modern — Post-Modern," *Theoria*, (October, 1992), pp.129-141

[11] Morphet in Geertsema, "Ordinary — Modern — Post-Modern," *Theoria*, (October, 1992), p.170.

apparently dreaming about himself. What emerges from his dream is a depiction of himself dreaming about himself smoking a cigar (possibly a roll of dagga). In other words, this sketch captures a dream that comprises three layers of experience built one upon the other. Facing upwards, the image of the eye of the man in the third level of the dream is wide open, and seems indicative of his consciousness of the expansive world above him. The central figure of this platform of the dream is bald, perhaps indicating a world that offers him more possibilities than an apartheid context where such petty issues as hairstyle, texture and colour are texts around which various identities are inscribed. The smoke-emitting cigar in his mouth is evocative of fire and this may be an overt allusion to the fire that God in the Bible intends to use to cleanse the world at the end of time. It seems therefore that Matlou uses this character to invoke a form of retribution against the system that has disinherited him as a racial subject. As a text that offers release from the "fact of blackness,"[12] the dream in this drawing starkly contrasts with the apartheid-induced dejection that Matlou depicts in the character lying helpless in a foetal position. This character's desperation is also evident in his unkempt hair, closed eyes or drunken stupor, his emaciated physique and in his apparent dependence on scrounging food from the rubbish bins.

[12] This phrase is used following Frantz Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans., Charles Lam Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp.109-140.

This desperation is also echoed in "DRINKING AT STREET CORNERS IN THE CITY" (figure 3). The main character's head in this figure is bowed and his hair is also as unkempt as that of the key figure of "PARK SLEEPERS ARE ON THE INCREASE." This figure sitting on the rubbish bin appears to lack the imagination that would afford him the opportunity to indulge in a flight of fantasy that is therapeutic, that is, in a way that would position him as the author of his own notion of himself. In this drawing, we see instead the reality of black dejection, a mode of representation that Njabulo Ndebele terms the "spectacular", [13] where the surface realities of apartheid are so overwhelming that they compromise reflection or intellectual engagement. Given the overwhelming sense of victory over alienation that Matlou lucidly sketches in other drawings, but mostly in his stories, it is fair to contend that he does not intend to be trapped in the "spectacular."

A further example of deliverance from the naked reality of depersonalisation is apparent in the sketch that Matlou titles "INSIDE MY HEAD IS NOT EMPTY" (figure 4). Matlou presents what looks like an image of himself without a head or the lower part of his body. It is possible that his wish to be published emanates mainly from the desire to reflect on his own consciousness. It seems that Matlou sees the act of producing a text (be it in words or through drawing) in contradictory terms. Textual production for him is a modernist enterprise that mirrors his desire to be published in English. Judging also by Matlou's fascination with the dream in the drawing discussed earlier, however, writing and drawing are deficient because they are, in his view, reductionist. Hence as if transcending the English language and the photograph sent to *Staffrider*, Matlou draws himself without mirroring his own head that, in the context of apartheid, after all, is

[13] Njabulo Ndebele, *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1991), pp.37-57.

inscribed with negation. Blankness in this drawing therefore enunciates the theme of resistance to racial stereotype without entering the fraught ideological terrain[14] where resistance is likely to be undermined by using the same arbitrary system of signs that the coloniser has already clouded with negation.

The dialogue between writing and drawing, and the liberating blankness of figure 4 bring to the fore Matlou's quest to maintain a sense of completeness in the face of homelessness. This quest is one of the main themes that run through all Matlou's stories. Yet it is necessarily a contradictory and difficult one in which blankness does not always allow for a transcending over negation. In one image (figure 7), Matlou deploys a typically nationalist idiom, 'a map of Africa', in order to enunciate this completeness, which is further emphasised by the human visage inscribed onto the map. On one level, this image metaphorically negates the balkanisation of Africa: Matlou does not register geo-political boundaries in this map except for the name of the apartheid-created "BOPHUTHATSWANA" which is evidence of the last attempt at the further balkanisation of Africa. Yet, this apparently productive blankness of a boundaryless map is undercut by the title of the image, "SAD AND ALONE," with the author's first name in large capitals under the image. His name appears in quotation marks. These serve, on the one hand, to draw attention to the space of the name as a realm dependent on recursive quotation and, on the other, as a contingent terrain or interval which could be filled with another term and another identity.

[14] he confluence between Homi Bhabha and Matlou's views on blackness as a resistance is noted. It is argued that Matlou is not at all interested in presenting this identity in an endless chain of postponement that, as Bhabha seems to do, is typical of Jacques Derrida's notion of "Deconstruction". For a critique of Bhabha, see, for example, Robert Young's "The Ambivalence of Bhabha" in *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp.141-156.

Compared to "SAD AND ALONE," however, "SLEEP-HUT" (figure 5) portrays a less ideologically burdened assertion of the self. The latter drawing, which invokes glorification of the farm/rural home, asserts an inalienable bond between Africans and the hut/house by substituting the hut's roof with a physiologically black human visage. Only a thin line divides the hut and its visage roof, and this suggests that Matlou sees political rhetoric and resistance as complex. (The subject of resistance is explored at length in Chapters Five, Six and Seven) In this way, Matlou effects a portrait of Africa that predates the thorny question of black nationalism and its sometimes unwitting collusion with neo-colonialism.[15]

"SLEEP-HUT" is a far cry from the "PARK SLEEPERS ARE ON THE INCREASE" and "DRINKING AT STREET CORNERS IN THE CITY" where the apparently drunk protagonists do not maintain eye contact with the viewer. In fact, the hut's door and windows are almost redundant features against the human organs of perception. Judging by the fact that this visage is perched above the hut, it seems possible that Matlou argues that a more sober depth of vision is possible from this periphery whose convincing senses of perception collectively point towards a social world complete with a philosophy that emerges more from material contact with reality than from mere political rhetoric. Apartheid severely discourages such contact.[16] Unlike the framed farmer in the white man's spectacles and also in colonial discourses, the African in "SLEEP-HUT" neither

[15] Matlou's subtle critique of nationalism calls to mind Ngugi wa Thiong'o's portrayals of neo-colonialism in terms of greed. See Ngugi's *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics Of Language In African Literature*. (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986) and his *Devil on the cross*, (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1987).

[16] For a critical discussion of apartheid's usage of euphemism to attempt to masquerade human rights violation, see, for example, Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon's discussion of Jacques Derrida in "No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's "Le Dernier Mot du Racisme" in *"Race," Writing, And Difference*, Henry Louis Gates Jr,. ed., (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp.339-353.

defines (him)self exclusively through colonial violence, nor solely through the often fraught black nationalist vocabulary. However, at the same time, it must be noted that the image itself has an aura of whimsy about it which points simultaneously to a recognition that such dreams of innocent return were, at the time of composition, regarded as somewhat fanciful.

The bearded mouth of the 'visage-roof' of "SLEEP-HUT" indicates that Matlou projects this imagined recuperative position as masculinist. This emphasis is however by no means characteristic of all of his work. Consider, for instance, his portrayal of school unrest in 'MABOPANE' (a Pretoria North Township) (figure 6). Dressed in school uniforms, the central female character of this image wields an axe with her right hand, and a stone with her left hand. Her left hand is raised and invokes the "Black Power" fist. However, this fist does not simply valorise racial resistance. The axe-carrying hand likewise is not only another version of this 'Black Power' fist but also denotes that she is a traditional hewer of wood. As Matlou implicitly argues in the accompanying narrative, the axe is intended to suggest a fight against homelessness (a "place to stay") and the need for "jobs". Through this image, Matlou expands the vocabulary of Black Consciousness to prioritise black women rather than reiterate the construct of the colonially-framed black subject in which the woman is invisible. In addition, his image points to ideas of black feminism in which indigenous templates of femaleness (in this case, women as powerful workers cutting down trees) are reworked to produce a positive discourse about women.[17]

[17] For a detailed discussion, see, for instance, Dorothy Driver, "M'a-Ngoana O Tšoare Thipa ka Bohaleng—The Child's Mother Grabs the Sharp End of the Knife: Women as Mothers, Women as Writers," in *Rendering Things Visible: Essay on South African Literary Culture*, Martin Trump, ed., (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1990), pp.186-204.

Matlou's drawings often convey moral condemnation, particularly censure of those who bought into the homeland system for their own selfish ends. Next to his drawing of Patrick Mphephu's head (figure 10), Matlou writes "THOHO YA NDOU" and so emphasises the literal meaning of the place name, namely, the head of the elephant, and in so doing alludes to misgivings about Mphephu's intelligence. Elsewhere, Matlou portrays the homeland leaders as "pigs" (See "I CONGRATULATE YOU …" figure 8).

The anthropomorphism evident in "SLEEP-HUT" (and indeed in "SAD AND ALONE") illustrates Matlou's attempt to nail indisputable power on a language mast in order to break free from his desperation as a disenfranchised black person. In both images, the quest for the sense of completeness is emphatically a language enterprise where he portrays a self via a marvellously realistic conjoining of signs of physical space with those of a black visage. Size certainly matters in Matlou's search for fulfilment, considering that the hut's roof resembles the human head that has two wide open eyes (as opposed to the one eye of the central figure in the dreaming character of "PARK SLEEPERS ARE ON THE INCREASE"), fairly emphasised ears, a pair of nostrils, and a mouth bordered by bulgy cheeks. This clarity contrasts with the portrait of home that Matlou depicts in one of his stories, "a new two-roomed house," (39-40) to critique the architecture of the house that apartheid had designed for black people in urban areas or townships. According him, [l]ife at home was really like hell". (40) It is emphasised that the completeness in 'SLEEP-HUT", which endorses the emotive thrust, is expressed through the language of desire that apartheid attempts to repress through the dreaded migrant labour system and forced removals. The personification of the "hut" with two wide eyes, and the map of Africa underscore this desire.

In speaking out against human rights violations, Matlou uses metaphors that are dense with the data of collective experiences. Consider, for example, the compactness of this medium that overwhelms his comprehension, so that he literally transposes metaphors onto the character that he wishes to draw attention to. One consequence of this artistic style is that he produces fairly eclectic images in which many narratives compete for attention. For instance, in "WHICH WAY YOU KISS YOUR "BODY WORK?" (figure 9), in terms of the Old Testament where the pig is the spiritual and moral quintessence of filth, Matlou's allusion to this Biblical text, especially in his expression of condemnation of the homeland leaders (in "I CONGRATULATE YOU…"), ties in with his disgust with pigs. Matlou certainly relies on the Bible to express his seeming hatred for pigs. This derision accrues from his memory of his family's physical experience with pigs, and is strongly brought to the surface when he says "I swear by God, the pig is a devil. If you close the mouth of a pig and hit it, the sound will come through its nose". (16) "SLEEP-HUT" and "I CONGRATULATE YOU…", the images that feature the structure of the pig, however, elide and do not explain Matlou's seeming contempt for pigs.

A major theme of this "WHICH WAY YOU KISS YOUR "BODY WORK?" is the greed that the homeland system spawns. In this image, the mouth of the apparent homeland leader is drawn in such a way that it is, at the same time, the pig's belly. The pig itself has a normal head. Its rear, however, resembles a human face. In effect, Matlou seems to suggest that the figure of a homeland leader is enormously greedy. His mouth is not only pig-like, but can also ingest food through both ends of the pig, that is, the head and the tail. Nothing is released as unwanted material. Matlou reminds us of Bayart's metaphor of the gluttonous politicians of neo-colonial Cameroon: "In Cameroon they talk of *la*

politique du ventre –the politics of the belly." [18]

However, this depiction of overindulgence is counter-balanced in another drawing that merges an image of a human visage and that of a fish (figure 11). Similar to "WHICH WAY YOU KISS YOUR "BODY WORK?," the visage of the former has two mouths: one of a human being and the other of a fish. However, the composite creature seems to stand on a huge leg that also resembles a tree trunk that morphs into toes, instead of roots, and is held obliquely in position with the help of an image of a tapering dorsal fin. The symbiosis that Matlou implicitly captures in this drawing echoes in the predominance of the images of sight, that is, the pairs of human eyes and spectacles, respectively, as well as in the fish's eye. Collectively, the three images conjoin to suggest a sense of buoyancy and of sanity in the context of apartheid modernity that alienates black people from who they truly are or aspire to be.

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Matlou's stories are replete with as interesting strategies of mediation as his drawings. This is how the first story begins:

> It all started like a dream, when I was a farm-boy near the Magaliesberg mountain. The South African flag was still in the air, waving its colour-signs. I must have been very little then, because I could only see as far as 1 000 metres. I was born on the farm of a white family. I was the little son of Mr Matlou. Really, I was a farm-boy.
>
> I was named Medupe because I was born during a slow-falling rain. I was well-known all over the farms because of my simple name. I was the roots of the family's life. (11)

Entitled *Life at Home and Other stories*, the anthology comprises a series of autobiographical fragments and narratives which range over his early childhood on a

[18] J.F. Bayart, *The State In Africa: The Politics Of The Belly*, trans. Mary Harper, Christopher and Elizabeth Harrison, (London and New York: Longman, 1993), p.xvii.

farm, experiences of growing up and his time as a mine worker. The opening paragraph of the collection enacts many of the themes and issues raised in his visual images. For example, the passage invokes the realm of dream while pasting onto it the simulacrum of realism ("1 000 metres") in much the same way as Matlou noted precise times in the margins of his exercise book, juxtaposing this clock 'realism' with the mythical time of his narrative. The strident and strongly visual symbol of the flag pronouncing its problematic nationalism could well have come from one of his images, the flag reflecting back its oppressive colour-signs to those whom it excludes. (The flag incidentally is invoked here not because Matlou was born before the political transition to democracy but rather prior to the inauguration of the homeland system.) We have, however, already encountered him on the cover of his book bearing a different name, "Joël." The image, "Sad and Alone" (figure 7), where this name appears in quotation marks, has already indicated that the space of the name during apartheid is only provisional and can be changed at a moment's notice. The theme of the conflicting demands created by imposed identities, apparent in his images, is also announced here. Matlou, in this passage, is unsurprisingly triply-named: he is the little son of Matlou, a farm-boy, and Medupe. Together, these names outline his insertion into the world of the colonially created farm. Excluded by the colour-signs of the flag, Matlou is the "boy" of the farm but not of the white family. At home, he is the youngest son and carries a name associated with soft rain, a name which makes him known all over the farms.

Embedded in this naming is yet another level of significance which lies beyond the horizon of English that, as part of colonial modernity, is responsible for his alienation. The phrase "the little son of Mr Matlou" is a direct translation from the Setswana *gofejane* or *fejane*. He has a substantial interest in the ideological import of being his family's "little son." Unlike the Nguni cultures where the heir is the first son, Setswana

and Northern Sotho cultures charge the last son with this responsibility. As the youngest son, Matlou Jnr is likely to be vividly imprinted in his father's mind. The social and familial obligation of Matlou Jnr is thus appropriate and makes him "the roots of the family's life," despite being "born on the farm of a white family" without basic human rights. At the same time, Matlou also provides a record of the family history in the act of writing, and so in that sense becomes their "root."

However, such self-reclamation is — not without irony — itself mediated by reality. Matlou is aware that he considers his narration of his family as a special ethical obligation. To this end, he must invoke an appropriate existential paradigm or consciousness. Thus, having identified himself as "Medupe because I was born during a slow-falling rain… [and therefore] well known over the farms because of my simple name," (11-12) he leaps to the conclusion that he "was the roots of the family life". (12) This is a cultural privilege that the researcher's fieldwork on Matlou's biography reveals that he did not merit culturally, irrespective of whether, or not, he was "born during a slow-falling rain." His narration of his siblings, "[My mother's] first son was called Moloko… the last one was called Piet," (29-30) attests to his middle/intermediary position in the birth sequence in his nuclear family. Having appropriated this paradigm/consciousness, however, he regards himself as the heir-in-waiting, that is, the custodian of the nuclear family's identity in the event of the father's death.

In accordance with Matlou's cultural background, one's identity as either the first son or the last one is also an arena of metaphysical battles in which magic, by neighbours and extended relatives, features. Hence, in this story, he presents himself as exuding the charm that his father's employer, "Mr Dick," "an old man of about 69 years," (15) finds impressive. Matlou is assailed at the age of nine by "an old woman known as Mogwapa,"

a witch who "walked at night". (17) He alleges that "*Mogwapa*" "hammered a big needle into the top of [his] head". (18) As a protagonist of his own fable, Matlou lives to tell his story. When the story concludes, he is preparing to begin formal school, an event that he seems to attribute to the fact that his mother noticed him singing "*Morena boloka Sechaba sa rona*," ("Lord Save our Nation") (21-22) considered a resistance hymn during the liberation struggle (and later adopted as the opening to South Africa's national anthem with the dawn of non-racial democracy).

One of the textual procedures that Matlou uses in this conclusion is to invoke Setswana as a '*back-text*' against which the English should be read. Comparable to the juxtaposition of image and text, he sets up a contrastive tension between different languages. In this section, this study explores how this particular textual strategy becomes a further technique for initiating methods of mediation and speaking about oppression.

One feature of Matlou's style is the presence of an apparently direct translation from Setswana. In part motivated by a poor command of the English language, this technique is also indicative of his attempt to mobilise a sense of time and space that apartheid denies black people, and that standard English cannot in the same way prioritise. Consider, for example, the following maxim, which appears in the opening paragraph of the story 'Man Against Himself', which relates Matlou's experiences as a mineworker. It reads: "The life of a man is very heavy in his bones and his future is a deep unknown grave." (53) By '*back-projecting*' the proverb in this way, the text opens up a space between the two and asks us to compare them. The 'original' proverb, "*Lebitla la monna le fa thoko ga tsela*," ("Man's grave is along the street"), relies on an implied communal third person perspective and provides an emotionally detached reflection on traumatic experiences without reducing thought processes to the physiological reality that

oppression is, and without looking at it strictly as a personal affliction, but, rather as the destiny of all (hu)man beings. The neo-proverb, by contrast, highlights the physiological facts of an oppressive life of manual labour and presents death as a gaping hole, not dissimilar to the mines. While acknowledging that death is an unpredictable event, Matlou nevertheless approaches it as a shared and, thus, less frightening reality (we will all die somewhere along the road of life). The resulting sense of comfort also recurs in the knowledge that many black migrants such as Matlou do, in actual fact, return to their homes from the migrant labour contracts physically unscathed. By implication, these migrants conquer death.

Matlou's act of translating from Setswana to English is, however, not an exercise geared merely at ensuring a dispassionate but successful communication with the broader (South African) audiences. Translation, in this case, involves establishing context-specific positions from the body of information that he accumulates while employed as a migrant labourer. For him, scientific truth is irrelevant.

From the English language, for instance, Matlou knows that the earth was once thought to be flat, and that this was subsequently proved to be inaccurate. However, he prefers to affirm the fallacy because it is to him incidentally made to appear valid when looked at from the perspective of those who are forced to eke out their living in the literal and labour-intensive industries. (Matlou is not blind to the fact that blacks enter Western modernity often from disadvantaged positions, and hence find some of its propositions and counter-propositions neither relevant nor appropriate to the African realities.) For instance, in his patient building of the conclusion of his story in which he narrates his experiences of working in the mines, he establishes a complex position out of a plethora of African reflections and from Western science maxims. Having collected his twenty-

five days wages from the mine "paymaster," life, Matlou asserts, and not death, prevails. He remarks that he thereafter "escape[d]" his employment across the agricultural fields from where he took a train at "Northam station" (69) for Rustenburg. Having "thrust [money] into my empty pocket and walked out of the main gate towards the bush to free himself," he notes confidently

> [t]hat time life was not endless but everlasting. The earth was once supposed to be flat. Well, so it is, from Hlatini to Northam. That fact does not prevent science from proving that the earth as a whole is spherical. We are still at the stage that life itself is flat—the distance from birth to death. Yet the probability is that life, too, is spherical and much more extensive and capacious than the hemisphere we know. (70)

He rejoices at the prospect of reaching the station successfully, and he ingeniously attributes this success to a disputed notion about the earth being flat. In a rather tongue-in-cheek mode, he sardonically uses the notion that the earth is flat to comment on the worst case evidence of black depersonalisation. In other words, he uses the adjective "flat" as a metaphor to describe the state of vacillating between the dull and bleak, unemployment and the vicious migrant labour setting. His triumph is evident when, rather than continue to eke out a living as a mine labourer, Matlou resolves to return home and face life without work. As is evident from the beginning to the end of this story, *Man Against Himself*, he infers from his "escape" that "[he] know[s] now that [he] can live one day at a time and that every day is a time for a wise man". (76)

The construction of a similar alternative experience resonates in Matlou's portrayal of his family's appropriation of Christianity. He foregrounds at the beginning of the second story, 'Life At Home', that his family entered modernity, among others, in the terms that are reminiscent of those governing indentured labour:

> Where we were, we could really feel what the life of a slave was like. Bought and sold like a piece of furniture, having no say over where he went, whom he belonged to or what kind of a life he led.

> When wealthy people died, they left their slaves to other people,
> just as they left their other belongings. (23)

Matlou further notes implicitly with pity that this callousness is evident in the landlord's calling of Matlou's mother "a Kitchen girl", and in the derogatory practice of "call[ing Matlou senior] at night, using the sound of a gun, to help [the farmer] at the garages of their two old-model Ford station-wagons". (29) Despite the drab picture that Matlou paints about his family, however, he manages to transcend the bitterness that the base world of the farm owners provokes in him. Instead, he is more attracted to his family's ingenious translating of the Christian religion to correspond with the fellow farm workers' need to broaden and amplify themselves experientially. As opposed to a slave who is not expected to complain and balk but to obey, for instance, the Africans appropriate Christian texts in quotidian and self- rewarding practices. Hence, in one of the memories that tower in his mind about his nuclear family, his father is a "Moruti" [preacher] who "takes[s] an empty 25-litre can and cover[s] both sides with an old suitcase's leather, and beat[s] it to make '*Moropa*'". This is a percussion instrument and at the sound of the beating of it "people [would] sing and dance around and around, wearing white dust-coats with the cross embroidered at the back." Matlou is more at home in this stream of consciousness that also avails him the vision of his people's disregard of the Christian proscription of theft in what they see as their pursuit of spiritual or existential accomplishment. This is because they "stole red and green wool at the boss's house and tied the wool to people, around their necks, their wrists, their waists and their ankles, so that the staff church–goers might be healed".[19] (27)

As an individual, Matlou develops a phenomenon similar to the one that his father and his

[19] See the discussion of Njabulo Ndebele's theme of self-healing and organic intellectuals in his stories in Chapter Three of this thesis.

congregation begin when they translate Christian conventions to address their conditions as racially exploited labourers. In contrast to his family, however, fables, the origin of which seems to be oral stories narrated by black Africans in mine hostels anxious about who or what they have become as people suffering alienation, drive his search for fulfilment. A theme that dominates these stories is therefore a quest for a space to call home. Against a background of forced removals, farm evictions, displacement, poverty, and migrant labour, this search is a difficult and onerous one. In attempting to narrate these circumstances, Matlou utilises both mythical and realistic templates to suggest the extremity of these experiences. The story, 'My Ugly Face', for example, narrates another episode of displacement in his life. He finds himself living in a tent near the Zimbabwean border (possibly having been forcibly removed?), and with three friends sets off on a journey. They wander through wilderness and farmland, and they face deprivation and danger. They sleep on rubbish dumps and compete with rats and cattle for food. Matlou's friend dies and, terrified, Matlou makes a solo journey back to his tented camp with his mother.

The danger presented by these extreme circumstances is that Matlou may lose himself and his identity. He will in effect enter a state of amnesia. Elsewhere in the collection, he cites two main factors behind this amnesia: the trauma of exploitation and the mine "injection" that "makes you forget about your parents, relatives and friends… makes you think only about work underground." (67) It was common practice during apartheid to be intravenously fed with fear-conquering substance just before being employed underground to dig for mineral deposits. The researcher's fieldwork on this process of de-humanising reveals that it drastically affected the labourers' socialisation with their nuclear family units in the rural homelands. Observation has also shown that mine migrants, especially, do not easily readjust to the decorum of their communal societies

and families on returning home. For migrants, the homebound journey is beset with apprehension, because the returnee is unsure of his sanity or is apprehensive of the fact that "home," as well as the sense of it, is regularly assailed by forced removals. Matlou's stories present the way the literal and figurative violence of the migrant labour system overshadows the cultural (and spiritual?) pollination that happens as a result of migration.

To explore this situation of being on the edge of amnesia and oblivion, the story is located at the juncture of various worlds so that the protagonist is always in danger of being sucked across a boundary into another realm. The story is set on the Zimbabwean border. The protagonist himself is at a liminal age (fifteen years, roughly the age of initiation). The story traverses different time zones: it starts off when the protagonist is a baby; we then jump to his being 15 years old, and at the end he returns to being a baby. The protagonist also finds himself at the boundary of the animal/human world and has to compete with cattle and rats for food. Finally, he has to negotiate the frontier between the world of the living and the dead: at one stage, while sleeping in the open he is assailed by an other-worldly female ape-like animal which compels him to have sexual intercourse. Matlou's story alludes to the phobia that is often narrated by migrants who express a sense of being emasculated and being sexually preyed on by beasts. The frustration of being confined in single-sex hostels seems to be the primary cause of such anxieties.

In order to deal with the angst that is similar to that which Matlou describes as the one that vexes the male migrant, the Setswana and North Sotho narrative template of "*sauwe*" or "*sabubi*" is often told to euphemise the predicament of amnesia. "*Sauwe*" or "*sabubi*" designates acute forgetfulness/loss of one's home and it is sometimes spoken of as a temporary sojourn with the ancestors. This sojourn tends to be experienced by those who act in many ways that are contrary to the social norms, so that the entire lapse into

disorientation is effectively a disciplinary or rehabilitating session. Portrayed as a journey through darkness, the experience manifests itself as the protagonist having no access to a semblance of himself and his people, nor way into the language of his own society. He thus roams around in a bewildering wilderness. In 'My Ugly Face', Matlou recasts this odyssey-template that makes him the lead character vulnerable to rape by the other-worldly female "ape." (91) It is a world in which he has completely lost his bearings: he and his friends "did not know where [they] were from;" they spoke a funny language, which [people] couldn't trace"; they had three toes, four fingers and had come to resemble animals. (92)

Also closely related to the theme of "*sauwe*" is a phenomenon that Matlou writes of implicitly as homosexuality, and that he also indirectly associates with bestiality. Patrick Harries attributes homosexuality that became apparent in the South African mine culture primarily to the "Immorality Ordinance" passed as far back as 1903. This is a law that restricted the migrant "workers to single-sex barracks" and from freely having romantic relationships with women. It was also hoped that this proscription would "channel [workers'] libidinal energy into [mine] work." In response to being thus constrained, the migrants turned to their male comrades sexually, perhaps also to construct their notions of gender and to consolidate a sense of power. Harries continues however that homosexuality in the Witwatersrand mine compounds became a social practice called "*bukhontxana*, or mine marriages," and that it has its roots among the "Shangaan" (Tsonga) of "Mozambican" origin[20] Joseph Masilo, a fellow mine worker whom Matlou meets in the mines, echoes the desperation implicit in Harries's portrait of a single-male hostel dweller. The mine hostel, Masilo argues, "is a jail…No girls around here and you

[20] Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, And Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c.1860-1910*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, London: James Currey,1994), p.200

must have respect for yourself until your sentence is finished". (61) He indirectly equates the notion of respect in this case with heterosexuality, and further constructs and scorns the counterpart in the form of homosexuality that he, also by implication, associates with the subhuman. Matlou's description of the episode in which he was sexually violated by an animal therefore echoes his friend's indirect disapproval of the mining industry and, by implication, of Matlou's disdain for homosexuality. Given also his African Initiated Christian upbringing, Matlou is homophobic probably because he reasons that it implicitly sustains the concerned migrants' alienation from the heterosexual/patriarchal factor that permeates their rural ethnic and religious upbringing.

The figure who helps him re-establish his bearings is his mother, one of the many episodes of motherhood which form a master text in these stories. Matlou's return to his mother's back at the end of this story and the collection, for instance, is symbolically a return to a world of innocence and pre-puberty most probably violated during his stay in the mine hostel when he was employed for 25 days. Sexuality in 'My Ugly Face' is thus a theme that Matlou does not explicitly or consciously pursue mainly because his affirmation of his relationship with his mother seems written into his culture as mainly a symbolic means of redressing the violence committed against his family and people. This reversion is, of course, only fanciful. This is also where motherhood pervades with a transcendental significance beyond mere nature. The understanding of motherhood in these stories echoes the broader Setswana discourses on the subject. These draw a distinction between "*mmago*" ("your mother") and "*mme mmago*" ("mother, your mother"). The former is considered crude and unnecessarily parading of biological lineage, while the latter is considered to be foregrounding belief in nurture, so that the extended family structure is grounded in the belief that all mothers are mothers to everybody. The mother that Matlou encounters at the end of this story clearly conforms

to this broader definition of the term and it is this sense of motherhood that pulls him back from the brink of amnesia and its attendant dangers of falling into different worlds.

Another variant of the motherhood theme that Matlou develops is the goatskin bag, "thari" (used to cradle and carry young children), that he vividly recalls, "[e]ven today at our home in Mabopane is still in the wardrobe to remind me of when I was a child." (16) To combat the kind of experience that migrancy fosters, Matlou returns regularly to this theme of the "thari." It does not appear that Matlou ever got round to drawing the "thari," possibly because of the religious awe that the Northern Sotho and Batswana cultures often maintain or secure for the subject that concerns maternal lineage. Unsurprisingly, in the text, he inscribes the "thari" with meaning beyond the mere utility value of carrying a child on a mother's back. In Matlou's stories, the "thari" is symbolically a strategic platform for the articulation of a number of related concepts. The first of these is linked to the concept of home and return. The journey genre in apartheid and other contexts necessitates a man's alienation from home, from the state of innocence, and from the woman figure or mother. Migrants appear forever doomed to an aimless motion, or to migration authored by the system to benefit white society. Indeed, the twentieth century witnessed massive migrations in the world. In foregrounding the "thari," Matlou evolves a fitting metaphor to contest, even if briefly, such instability. At the end of the story, 'My Ugly Face', the protagonist, wandering lost and confused on a dusty road, encounters a figure coming towards him. Initially he does not recognize her. "She asked for my name and I told her my name slowly, because I was tired and hungry. I said, 'My name is Medupe.' She replied slowly like me, and said, 'My lost son, I am your mother.'" She then picks him up and places him in the "thari" on her back. The passage continues:

> Then she took me on her back, like a small hitchhiker, and we returned to the South East. On the way while I was on her back I slept and she just kept on going. (96)

The mother's "back" signifies the sense of patient strength and the eternal presence of family unity within the apartheid context that destabilised the black families and societies through urbanization and dispossession. The "thari" provides a point of refuge but this place of safety is of course only temporary and in some sense illusory since, in the time frame of the story, Matlou has retracted into childhood. Furthermore, he and his mother are not returning to a real home but only a tented camp, yet another brief point of minimal existence before they will be moved elsewhere.

In his stories, then, Matlou relies on a Setswana '*back-text*' to open up a gap, on the one hand, between the crushing realism of everyday life for the marginalised under apartheid and, on the other, the various ways of trying to make sense of, and intellectually conquer, even if briefly, the meaninglessness and oblivion demanded by mass oppression. Taken together with his drawings, his stories offer a repertoire of strategies and techniques to respond to the nature of oppression whilst evading the crushing categories that it constantly creates. His aesthetic becomes one way of dealing with oppression via a series of fugitive and ever-changing techniques. As this chapter has attempted to argue, the originality of his contribution lies in the way he negotiates this task through both text and image, invoking the relationship between the two to invent a broader category of 'writing' through which he can more effectively mediate the complexities of oppression and its evasion.

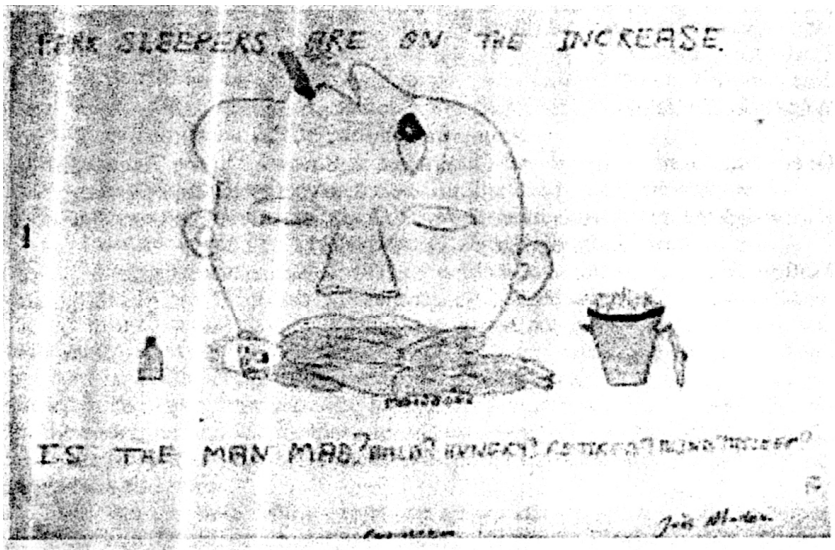


Figure 1: Joël Matlou, Park Sleepers are on the Increase, Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21cm

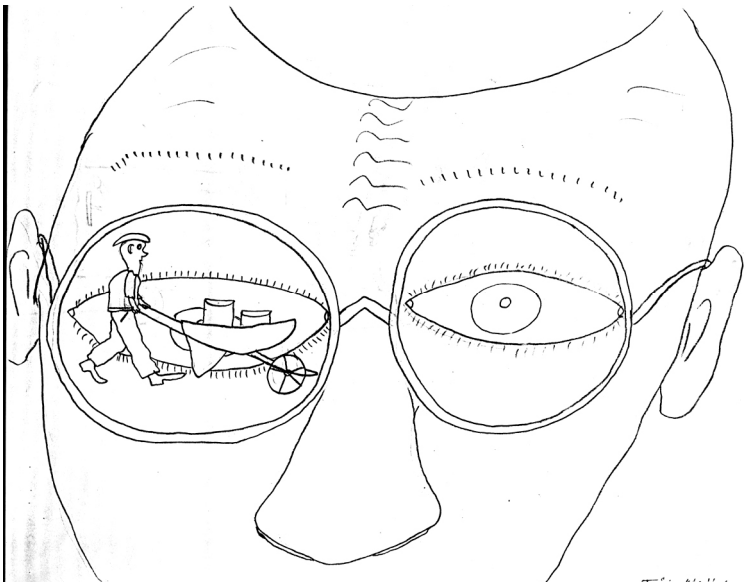


Figure 2: Joël Matlou, Untitled Pencil on Paper, 30cm x 21 cm.

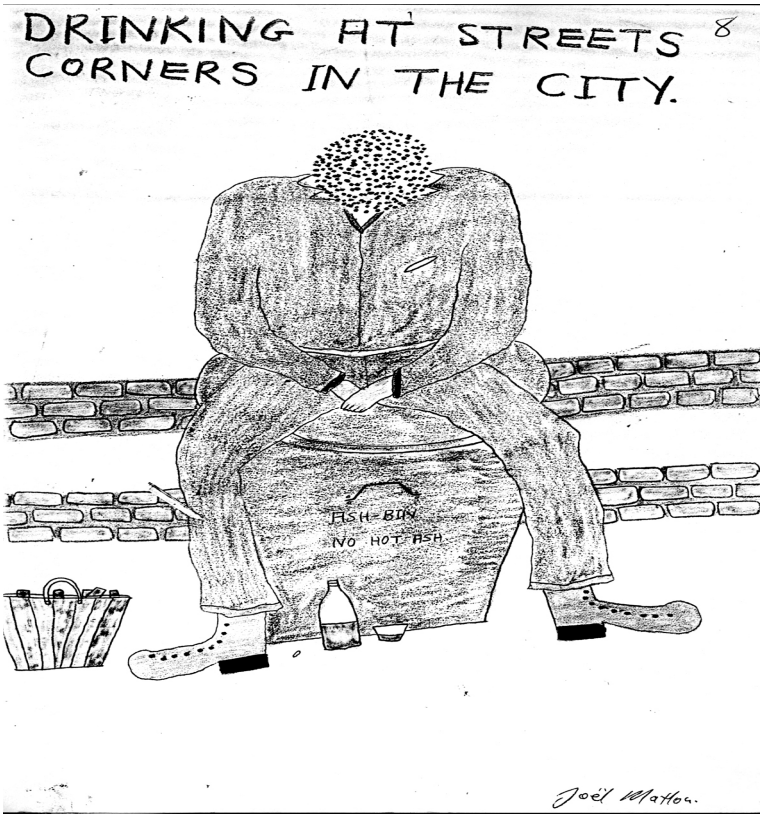


Figure 3: Joël Matlou, "Drinking at Streets Corners in the City," Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21 cm.

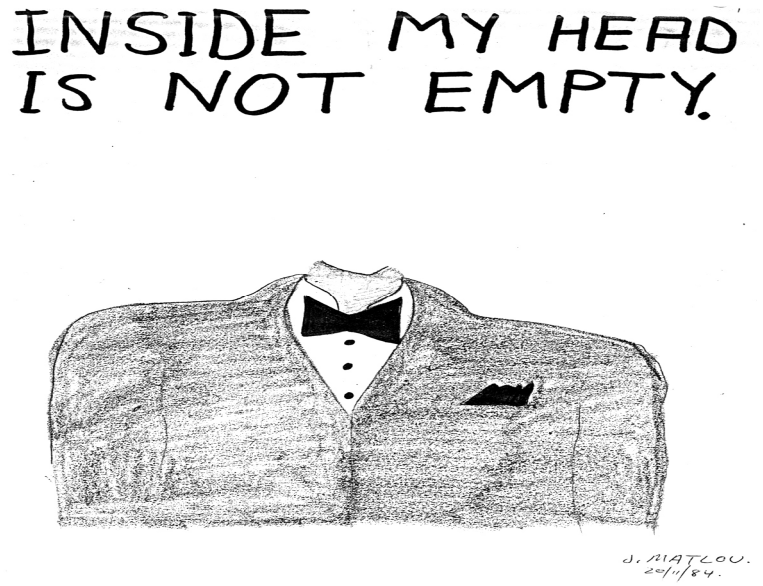


Figure 4: Joël Matlou, "Inside My Head Is Not Empty," Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21 cm

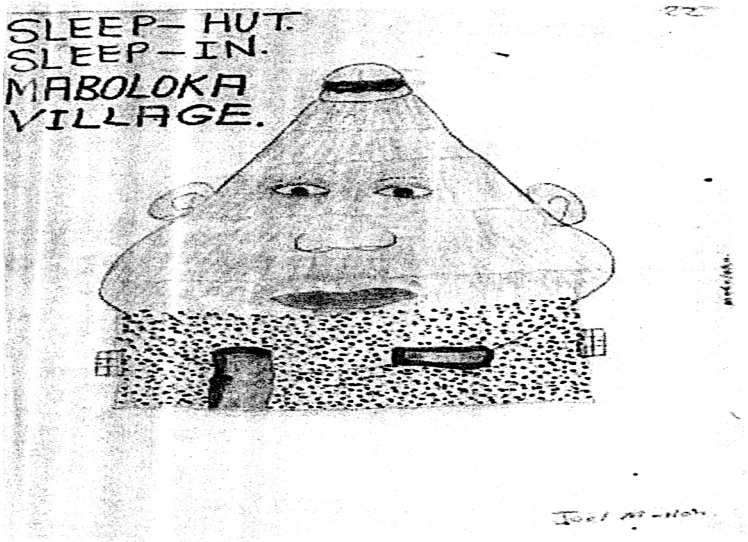


Figure 5: Joël Matlou, Sleep-Hut, Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21cm

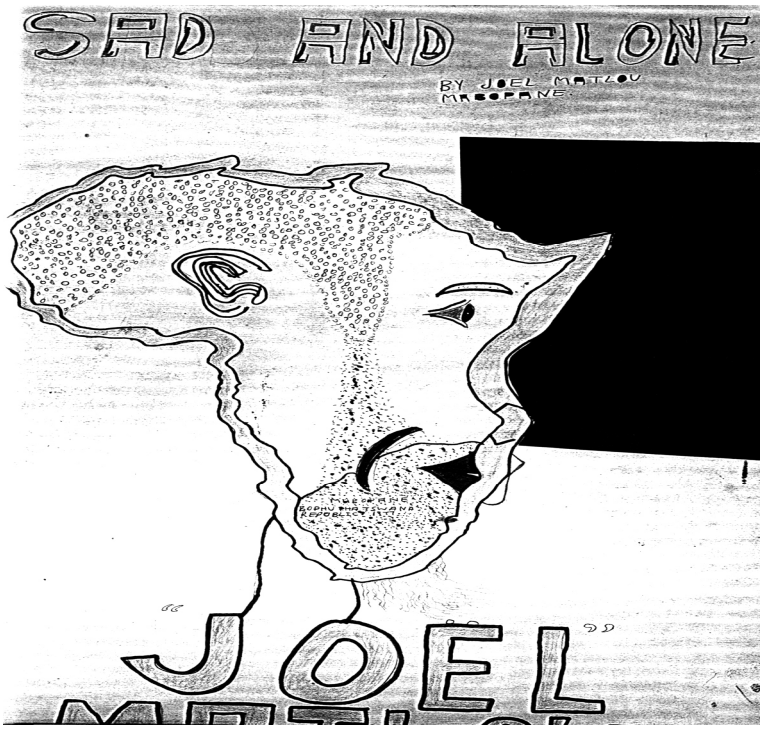


Figure 7: Joël Matlou, "Sad And Alone," Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21 cm

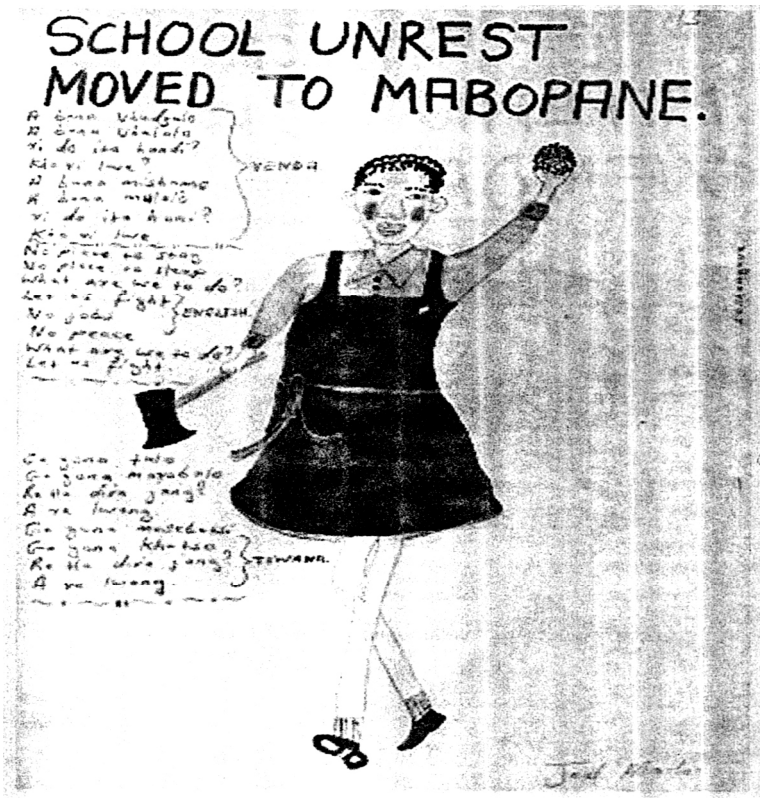


Figure 6: Joël Matlou, School Unrest Moved to Mabopane, Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21cm

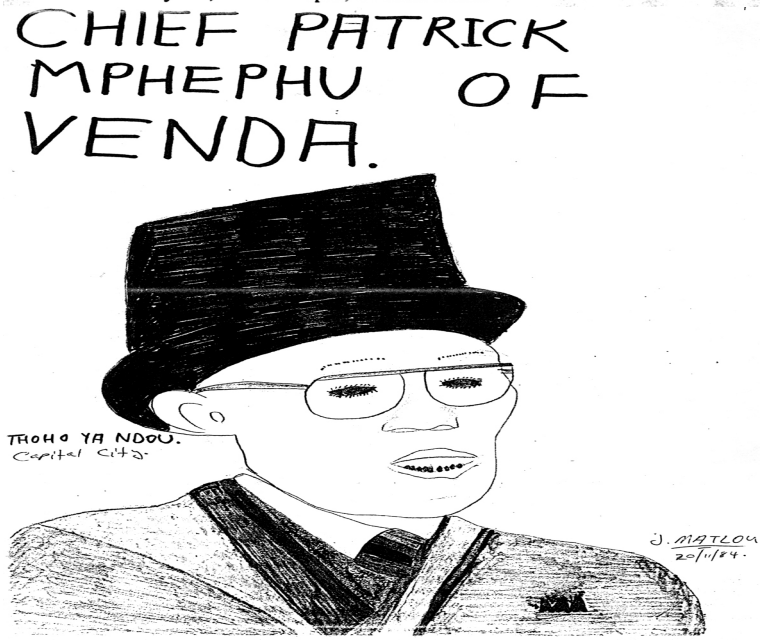


Figure 10: Joël Matlou, "Chief Patrick Mphephu of Venda," Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21 cm

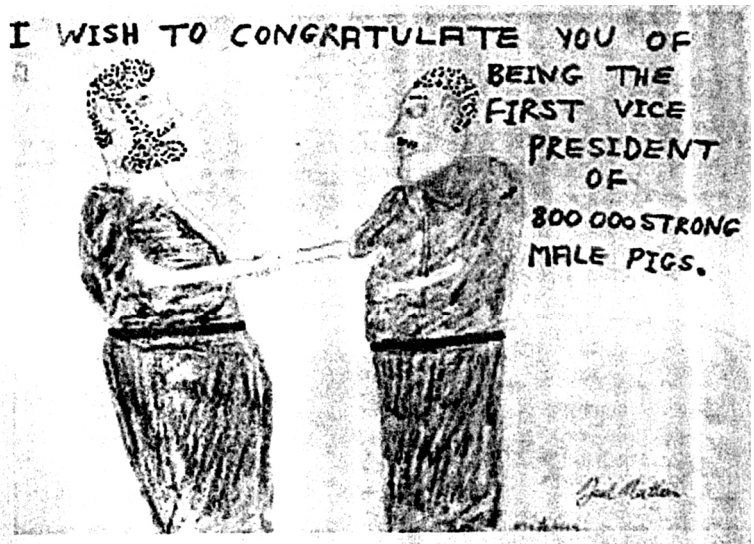


Figure 8: Joël Matlou, I Wish to Congratulate You…, Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21cm

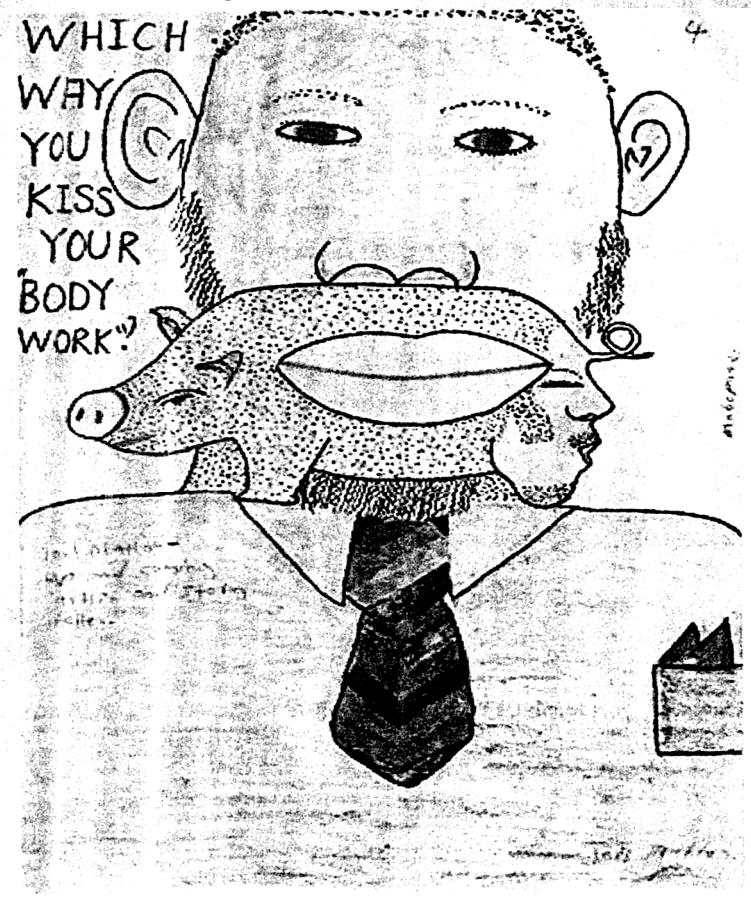


Figure 9: Joël Matlou, Which way you Kiss your "Body Work"?, Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21cm

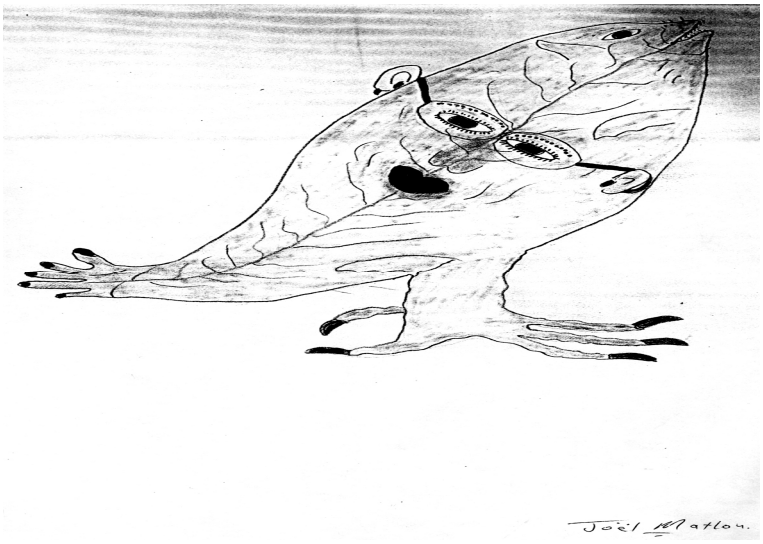


Figure 11: Untitled, Pencil, Crayons, Ink on Paper, 30cm x 21 cm