

No Sanctuary Then and No Sanctuary Now: Poems in Conversation

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Creative writing as a discipline is informed by reading. Accompanying every creative work, most programmes require writers to contextualise their creative strategies by using existing writing as references. When a writer reads, they are absorbing not only another writer's evocation of the world in the time and place sensed most acutely by them, but their poetics. An artist's attraction to a piece of art is often the source of research questions – discovering why *that* piece, by *that* artist. Almost thirty years after hearing Kgositsile's *Red Song*, I was able to trace my writing trajectory through my affinity for the poem, its musicality and rhythms, and the contradictory image of "armed struggle as an act of love" (Kgositsile 147).

The 'theory' of creative writing is poetics – a critical mode wherein the writer explicates their relationship with the language and traditions within which they are working. Keorapetse Kgositsile was intimately involved with the Black Arts Movement during his period of exile in the United States, roughly from 1962–1975. During this period, Black artists explicitly wrote critically about aesthetics because they wanted to make visible the values they sought to carry forward. An outstanding example of this kind of text is *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing*, a literary craft manual composed by Gwendolyn Brooks, Haki Madhubuti, Dudley Randal and Keorapetse Kgositsile. Kgositsile states: "though we are connected to all time, we belong, unarguably, to our time" and "any worship of literary craftsmanship divorced from the time a writer lives in is a perversion..." (Brooks 7).

For my PhD I composed a long poem, in a speculative fiction, beginning in 2035 and culminating in a war between the sexes in 2050. As a writer of primarily short lyric poems, I had to develop the capacity to write narrative. Kgositsile's poem, "There are no Sanctuaries except in purposeful action," (*The Present in a Dangerous Place to Live*, 1974. Third World Press), proved instructive and inspirational for what I wanted to do.

In his lament "There are no Sanctuaries except in Purposeful Action... Two," Kgositsile uses the lines "we die" and then "the fifties" repetitively as precursors to stanzas that describe, and sensorily, saturate, the conditions of Black life:

We die,
our unthinking lives aborted by the heedless
blade or bullet of a crazed thug. Or by a
hasty police baton, boot or bullet

We die,
quaffing shakespeare, the magna carta, the queen's
language and sipping four o'clock tea

We die,
though we remain animate in the silences that gaze
at us through the cracks which scar millions
of hollow and twisted township hearts

The fifties,
the thick of all those whitenesses in our eye
which seems to refuse to learn anything about power

The fifties,
we are so bleached at our supposed hippest
we call america home, edladleni

The fifties,
but really any white time as any place
where our Home is not our home

The fifties,
we live in a madhouse

The fifties,
this death is not new ...

(Kgositsile 91)

The concentration of images, colours and sounds capture the complexity of where he lived without sacrificing a kind of clarity, a deeply felt sense of a man thinking aloud in sound and rhythm, a kind of wordy music. It was that specific sound, or feeling, that drew me to his work, long before I even began to make poetry. Before I began to write my poem, “Riding out the Water”, I felt a similar mortal despair. So, I attempted to employ the same poetic device to render a future South Africa, and to extend the poem into narrative. The difference is that mine is a narrative poem, so there are characters who act and a plot that unfolds.

The nineties:

Ubuntu Inc, a man-made mesh designed to provide ‘a better life for all’, administered by Human Resources, civil servants, rational and self-controlled and of course, the House of Traditions, presided over by Bomama and Bobaba, redressing the oppression of the past, Afrika Borwa a Motherland, Bobaba its guardians, stewards and Bomama the queens, the beauties, the nurturers. After the Rainbow Parades of the nineties, four genders were legally permitted to marry, own land, and run for public office: boys, girls, girlieboys and boygirls, many of them people of the water.

The two thousands:

rumblings, the first pandemic, the cracking of the edifice of peace, endless skirmishes, assassinations, the Net, capturing all in its spell, spelling sweet nothings and presenting itself as the Only True Way, the struggles contained, agitation soothed, new outposts of Dome manned by Drones and Trols, surveillance replacing safety, subtly equated.

The tens:

the Citizens, the leadership, role modelling democracy for the People, retreat to the Dome: a hermetically sealed, temperature-regulated transparent bubble, recrafting history, reclaiming names Hoerikwagga, Gqeberha, Makhanda, eGoli, Thoyandou, the People fed an intoxicating sorcery of prophets, warriors and revolutionaries, reminded each day through speakers at street level that they walk in footsteps of greatness, can aspire to be Citizens but will need a well-stocked bank account to apply, meanwhile, on their behalf, the exchange of mining rights, the signing of treaties, the locking of access, while People stepped over raw sewerage to fetch their children from crèche and lost their sense of smell, as they learnt to chase the glimmer of gold, to zamazama, to forget to remember, to be good People, to comply, to obey, to build the nation. Until they stopped.

The twenties:

hospitals, schools, railways, bus systems scooped out, drained, as the infrastructures began to collapse through lack of care. Looting. As looters concealed themselves in layers of lies, for those with eyes to see, Healers became visible. Servants of umHlaba, with knotted hair and slow deliberation, laid out earth's seasonal jewels on cloths at taxi ranks and marketplaces, beetroot, spinach, butternut, strawberries. They studded gardens with humming hives. Servants of uMoya held hands with the dying, dried the tears of the living, and led larger and larger congregations to commune with the sky at the edges of towns. Keepers of Breath. Servants of uMlilo plied industry, gathering what they could beyond the survey of the Dome. Consuming, being consumed, the fire of civilisation. But none would survive without the numerous ones, the servants of aManzi, Yemanzi. Along the waterways of Afrika Borwa white-beaded priests of the Yemanzi lineage swayed along well-worn paths inscribed next to rivers, as they always had. Singing the landscape into existence, they proceeded to the water, picking up rubbish and waste, as they always had.

Alice, the orphaned high priestess,
 heir to abasebenzi bhokuni,
 The Sacred Staff of the Ancient Ones,
 was raised in tradition,
 educated at Herschel and Ohlange,
 twenty-one years' old
 when most forests had been decimated to feed
 the fevered sprawl of humans. Viruses, their habitats
 destroyed, swarmed to fester in throats, break bodies down,
 leap from species to species, continent to continent.
 The second pandemic rose and fell as
 industry's chimneys coughed foul vapours into
 the yellowish air, and waters retreated
 deep into the earth. Some call it drought
 but the Healers knew it was a season: Earth
 withdrawing bounty so that humans would return
 to reason.

The thirties:

Alice joined a group of concerned youth,
 and one evening in thirty-two, encountered Lerato
 at a protest meeting about a proposed mine
 that would poison water for a rural community.
 Contentious with opposing positions, Alice and Lerato
 broke away from the group, flinging out the terms of
 separate analyses, debating while the moon
 marched across the sky till it pulled up the sun. They
 talked till they ran out of words and tongues and hands
 grappled on in the language beyond language. Lying on
 her back in Lerato's bed Alice remembered
 initiation, how the girls' song died as they
 walked towards the hidden
 river, their buckets beating clumps of thatch grass. The path,
 a red scar dug by the finger of habit, of centuries of bodies
 hungry for water ploughing themselves towards the blue
 promise
 held in the stone arms of the mountain. At sunset the twasas
 placed their buckets beside the stream, and gathered
 their bodies as one in the dance, their arms

pistoned to the beat, Alice's nipples grazing
 Nkensani's shoulder blades, and Sthembile's
 against hers. At first she could feel her own
 body against theirs, against the night, against the drums
 and they danced till pebbles fell away from the earth,
 all that was not firmly held scattered – drunk on sound,
 she sensed only the larger animal of their bodies
 joined as one.

(de Villiers 12–16)

Relying on Kgotsitsile's idiomatic formulation of a time gave me the freedom to imagine my characters in a changed South Africa. The concentration of image allowed me to collapse explanations for our recent political changes into plot points that relate to our lives in this country. This was a short excerpt of the poem, which relates specifically to Kgotsitsile, and I wonder what he would say about it.

WORKS CITED

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