

# **Lewis, meet Lesego: A Comparative View of Lewis Nkosi (1936 - 2010) and Lesego Rampolokeng (b.1965)**

**Lindy Stiebel**

**ORCID iD:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2017.1355962>

## **Abstract**

Lesego Rampolokeng is often placed in a lineage of Mafika Gwala, Ingoapele Madingoane and Dambudzo Marechera, among others, when it comes to his written works. This article introduces another potential ‘ancestor’ to this list: Lewis Nkosi, the exiled South African writer. Both ‘fatherless’ boys, urban by birth, multi-talented in their oeuvre which embraces novels, plays, music, poetry and non-fiction, both engaged at one point in academic postgraduate studies yet were critical of the South African academy, Nkosi and Rampolokeng share foundational influences a generation apart. Most strikingly, however, it is in their deliberately cultivated ‘outsider’ status – outside party politics, outside convention, outside the norm, and yet profoundly wed to the importance of words and their power, their craft – that the similarities appear. Strikingly, Nkosi courted controversy in his early article ‘Fiction by Black South Africans’ (1965) first published in the year of Rampolokeng’s birth, in which he declared black South African writers of that era by and large lacking the ‘vigour of imagination’ to tackle the problems of the age creatively. In a later article entitled ‘Writers at the Barricades’ (1986), he prophetically wrote, ‘[i]t seems we must now wait for the generation of Soweto, the new children of the stone-thrower and the petrol-bomber, for another spectacular rebirth’ of black South African writing. Enter Rampolokeng on cue, a creative artist prepared to push literary and cultural boundaries through a number of genres, voicing the anger and violence of his age, whilst all the time being ‘tied to

the word’ in a way Nkosi would have understood. This paper, then, begins a speculative comparative analysis of these two writers and selected works, using the ‘outsider’ status dear to both as a way to draw them together.

## Introduction

Pulling together Lewis Nkosi (1936 - 2010) and Lesego Rampolokeng (1965 - ) for comparative purposes is a fascinating exercise. Though, to my knowledge, these two names have not often been uttered in the same sentence in literary analysis, they share some features and need to ‘meet’ each other, as it were. For the purposes of this paper, I have selected a few correspondences: namely, their literal and/or metaphoric ‘fatherless’ upbringing; their shared exile/outsider status *vis-à-vis* the literary academy and political climate; and their devotion to crafting words within a prolific multi-genre oeuvre. Doubtless, further thought and research will uncover others, but these three form a useful beginning to introduce these stellar South African writers to each other. I must confess at the outset that though I have been an Nkosi scholar for many years, I am not as versed in Rampolokeng’s work. I am, therefore, using the work of both as suggestive to their positions, and cannot claim to tackle an in-depth analysis of Rampolokeng’s writing but rely on representative pieces drawn from his varied collection.

Literary lineages are useful to understand where writers ‘come from’ and help readers and researchers understand how the writer comes to write the way s/he does. There are major recorded influences for each writer selected: for Nkosi the names of Faulkner, Baldwin and Conrad among others come to mind (see Stiebel & Gunner 2005, for example); for Rampolokeng the names of Burroughs, Bosman, Marechera and Gwala among others are mentioned (see Eisenhuth 2021, Lesego Rampolokeng entry in Wikipedia 2021, for example). Given Rampolokeng’s particularly multi-genre output, his lineage varies from prose writers to poets and musicians; in Nkosi’s case his lineage is more firmly prose based, both fictional and critical writing, with elements of poetry and music in evidence as minor themes. Music is a much stronger influence in Rampolokeng’s artistic endeavours as other papers have pointed out (see Sony, Washington, Mathe & Demir in *BKO Magazine* 2020). This article will discuss the two writers as primarily written word artists. The following two extracts give an

idea of the respective ancestral artistic ‘lineages’ of these two South African intellectual giants, born a generation apart: in an interview, Nkosi starts with Peter Abrahams and his work *Tell Freedom* (1954) as the first book he ever bought; prior to that, as a schoolboy, he recalls reading Dumas and Dickens,

Then, of course, later, much later on, when one had been at school and university and in certain forms of training, you discovered writers who became even more important in terms of craft. So I graduated to Henry James, Conrad and, of course, my real ancestor, William Faulkner. And it’s obvious why William Faulkner, because William Faulkner was writing about the South, and I came from another South, so those two worlds seemed to coincide. And it is curious: why a writer like William Faulkner? Because he was so entangled in the relationships between black slaves and the white citizens of the South of the United States. He was so suggestive in the ways of handling these situations and the language he developed to handle these situations that he became one of the greatest influences. Even in South America, you’ll find that most of the South American modernist writers will mention their ‘father’ is William Faulkner; so he is mine (Nkosi in Molver 2006: 222).

And here’s Rampolokeng (2017: 17-18) reconstructing his creative genealogy:

I draw inspiration from across the entire spectrum of the world’s literature, fine arts, music .... And writers who cut out and stomp on whatever literary conventions enslave, from Lautreamont, Artaud, and Pasolini onward .... I came to black consciousness via Mafika Gwala. I carry Aimé Césaire in my head. Frantz Fanon is my father. Burroughs is central as daddy formal innovator, plus. ... My ghetto-youth bibles: Mtutuzeli Matshoba’s ‘Call Me Not A Man’ and Mbulelo Mzamane’s ‘Mzala’ .... My gutter anthem was the ultimate poem of my black consciously-reaching-for-selfhood-days, ‘Afrika My Beginning’ by Ingoapele Madingoane.

## **Fathers**

Both cite different ancestors but both talk of a ‘father’, a primal source. For Nkosi it is Faulkner, for Rampolokeng it is Fanon with Burroughs added as a stylistic father comparable perhaps to Faulkner as a stylistic progenitor for Nkosi. This leads on to ‘real’ fathers, or lack thereof, for the two writers cited as a point of comparison above. Biographical summaries for Nkosi and Rampolokeng show they share urban township birthplaces: for Nkosi it was Chesterville in Durban, for Rampolokeng it was Orlando West, Soweto in Johannesburg. Both households were very modest and challenging. Nkosi writes about his:

All stories have a starting point, naturally. My life story commences in a life of a parentless and homeless child. I never saw my father; my mother died when I was seven and my grandmother, to whom my first novel *Mating Birds* is dedicated, brought me up: *To Esther Makhathini who washed white people’s clothes so that I could learn to read and write* (in Starck-Adler & Henrichsen 2021: xiv).

Nkosi was an only child and orphaned before he was eight. As a young child, there was only a negative image of a patriarchal figure in the form of his harsh uncle who loaded the young child with chores. As Lombardozzi (2021: 130 – 131) notes,

Nkosi stated that he could recall little, if anything, about his biological father and this may also have contributed to the negative representation of the genitor figure in his fiction.

His mother, a teacher, had to give this job up to look after her mother and infant child in the absence of Samson Nkosi, the father. Her death in her early twenties after medical complications from appendicitis had a profound effect on Nkosi, so much so that he had provisionally entitled his unfinished autobiography *Memoirs of a Motherless Child* after the famous Negro spiritual and subsequently Civil Rights movement song *Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child*. In effect, it appears Nkosi felt parentless – one lost through absence and the other through death – from his earliest years. His mother’s death he attributed to a futile reliance on prayer and divine intervention rather than medical help.

Nkosi’s profound scepticism of religion is shared by Rampolokeng who was born into a Catholic, working-class family. His mother raised him

after the early disappearance of his father who worked in a platinum mine, and is rumoured to have died on the mines. The violence and Catholicism of his childhood find expression in his work generally:

I grew up watching my mother get her face split under the fists and boots of a multitude of men, who, when she (I imagine) could take no more, were pushed on to expend whatever excess anger, energy, fury, fuelled by their own emasculation they had left on me (Rampolokeng 2017: 16).

Similarly, in an earlier work, he writes:

i heard the walls crack, those blows slashing into my mother's flesh opened holes in my soul i'm still trying to close .... later we walked for a long time, my sister moaned on my mother's back .... my mother's hand clutched mine. tight. i looked up in the dark (Rampolokeng 2005: 7 - 8).

The absence of a healing divine presence is evident and finds frustrated expression in the poem 'Sebokeng Siege' written in the early 90s which is replete with 'blasphemies against the icons of Christian religion, [and] also ... horror of the violence amongst blacks ... in Sebokeng township in Johannesburg' (Veit-Wild 1997: 563). While a later partner for his mother provided some semblance of a father figure for Rampolokeng, it is clear men, generally, are not to be trusted when it comes to providing shelter and security for their families.

What did save both children while they were growing into adults in such harsh environments was words and books. For Rampolokeng, who was 11 years old in 1976, the year of the Soweto uprising, words, sound and performance were linked. He recalls how:

[A]s a kid I used to listen to Radio Freedom. They would have a slot where they had poetry, I suppose as a means of mobilisation. And they introduced it by having these sounds of AKs going off to add some power to it. This rattling of guns and the static that's coming from your receiver, all these noises, this person reading poetry – it

was electric, you know, that's what I think ignited that first spark (quoted in Veit-Wild 2006: 77).

For Nkosi, a child of the 50s and 60s, books provided a well-documented escape from his peripatetic and financially unstable family circumstances in a manner Fanon had earlier recognised:

The little Negro is forced into a habit of solitude, so that his best friends are his books ... unable to assimilate, unable to pass unnoticed, he consoles himself by associating with the dead, or at least the absent ... an introvert and a sentimentalist who is always able to contrive a way of winning out on the level of ideas and knowledge (in Lombardozzi 2021: 131).

Before he discovered the work of Peter Abrahams, Nkosi devoured the historical novels borrowed from,

a mobile library for non-whites in (of all places) Red Square [in Durban], that scene of many stormy political meetings .... In those first books I borrowed, I was introduced for the first time to the literary embodiment of European history by the works of Dumas, Flaubert, Balzac and Hugo .... the vocabulary gave me as much pleasure as it gave me trouble; but such is the power of adventure and romance on a boy's imagination that I struggled through the novels with an array of dictionaries until I had garnered a formidable wordlist that astonished my essay master (Nkosi in Stiebel & Chapman 2016: 169).

It is clear from the above that both Nkosi and Rampolokeng shared a love of reading and learning that drew them into a pursuit of education that extended to doctoral studies at university. Nkosi was of the generation of mission schooled black children, attending the Zulu Lutheran High School, a boarding school run by missionaries in Eshowe, Zululand. Rampolokeng, a generation later, was not so fortunate on this score:

I got the worst formal education this side of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The architects of apartheid, sought to make me and mine 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' .... At any rate Bantu education was a crime

against humanity I will say to the end of my days (Rampolokeng 2017: 14,15).

Undeterred as a young man, Rampolokeng briefly studied law at the University of the North and years later was registered at Rhodes University to do a doctorate on one of his literary ancestors, Mafika Gwala. Nkosi's exile abroad, from his early twenties until he died in his 70s, meant his academic opportunities were far wider. He did his MA at Sussex on Daniel Defoe and the rise of the middle classes, and was registered for a doctorate on Joseph Conrad which was never finished. Both men were intellectuals; both left incomplete doctoral studies on their 'heroes' in favour of writing their own fictional or critical works (although Rampolokeng is said to be still working on his doctoral thesis after an hiatus).

Being transported imaginatively through words also translated into actual travels for both, largely as a result of their own writing – Nkosi left Johannesburg on a one-way exit permit for New York as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University in 1960 in recognition of his journalistic promise. His time as an exile will be commented on more fully below in terms of how it links him to Rampolokeng as an 'outsider'. But clearly, being an exile meant Nkosi could not return home and thus spent the rest of his years moving wherever work presented itself: London, Lusaka, Warsaw, Wyoming and finally Basel. Rampolokeng too, for different reasons, 'spent most of his early career travelling and working outside of South Africa' (Moreillon 2019: 23). One particular stay for a few months in the late 90s at a writer's retreat, Solitude Palace near Stuttgart in Germany, is described by Moreillon as notable in so far as it was here in this rural peaceful idyll that Rampolokeng composed *blue v's*, a tough critique of post-apartheid society in faraway violent South Africa.

Rampolokeng's range of reference speaks too of a breadth of education and imaginative traveling beyond South Africa's national boundaries: 'The Cry of Disillusion' calls upon 'dachau dresden nagasaki' (2019:55) while the narrator in *Horns for Hondo* says 'Israel is fresh in my mind ... I weep for Palestine & humanity turned bovine' (in Demir 2020: 7). These are but two small examples drawn from a much wider pool of engagement and referencing. As Demir notes in the special issue of *BKO Magazine*: 'Rampolokeng's work embraces and carries forward Gwala's philosophy of looking outward from within' (ibid). This kind of traveling,

both physical to conferences, writers' retreats, seminars, and imaginatively through reading and making connections, speaks to the fact that both Nkosi and Rampolokeng were at times in their creative lives 'better known outside of South Africa ... than in [their] home country' (Moreillon on Rampolokeng 2020: 23); and thus there has been an 'imbalance between [their] critical recognition within the country as opposed to beyond the country's borders, including the rest of the continent' (Stiebel & Gunner on Nkosi 2006: xviii). Both these comments can be applied to a greater or lesser degree to the two writers under discussion.

## Outsiders

Mention of exile and recognition, being outside/inside, brings me to the second point of comparison between Nkosi and Rampolokeng that this paper highlights: their outsider status in terms of the South African literary academy and also in terms of the predominant national narrative. Nkosi was, of course, literally an exile from South Africa in his early twenties, arriving in New York in January 1961. Given the fact that he had left on a one-way exit, he became known as the Nieman Fellow who could not return home. Nkosi was part of a generation of *Drum* writers including Nat Nakasa, Can Themba, Bloke Modisane and Arthur Maimane who took,

a desire to be part of a wider intellectual world with them into exile .... All of the above were nourished by cosmopolitan Johannesburg of the 1950s and its bookshops (such as Vanguard) with their links to London, Moscow and New York (Stiebel & Gunner 2006: xxii).

Though identifying as a writer of Africa, specifically of South Africa, Nkosi saw himself as part of a widening circle of continental and global identity, not narrowly nationalist. Exile for Nkosi was a double-edged sword – a source of sadness at leaving 'home' but also a source of opportunity for his writing career meaning he had to make his home **in** exile, make his peace with being an **outsider**. He wrote frankly about this in an essay entitled 'The Wandering Subject: exile as "fetish"' (2006):

In the rhetoric of exile discourse, more is known about its traumas than its pleasures, more about its physical anguish than about its



precarious rewards. ... This is a complex process of avowal and disavowal in which a fetish as substitute and compensation for an object feared lost is paralleled in the discourses of exile by an individual's attempt to find consolation in the pleasures afforded by *asylum* as the twin term and alternative to *mothercountry* (in Stiebel & Steffen 2014: 236,237).

Rampolokeng and Nkosi would, I think, have stood on the same side of the exile debate – Nkosi did not position himself as a victim of oppression in a simplistic way. As one sees from the above quotation, he - by way of contrast - acknowledged the privileges exile afforded, despite the pain of separation from home. In an interview with Robert Berold, Rampolokeng wrote:

I've come to realize holding up our scars is no solution. When somebody can shout to the world that they were being exiled or that they've been imprisoned or that they have suffered in this or that way – it means that we actually have some gratitude to the evils of the world – where we actually owe a lot to apartheid for having made us (in Mkhize 2011: 199).

Neither writer felt they owe/d anything to the state. If anything, their deliberate positioning of themselves as observers from outside the national narrative – particularly in the era of the 'rainbow nation' narrative of post-1994, allowed them a lonely, dissonant space from which to speak and write. Mkhize applies Quayson's idea of the ex-centric to Rampolokeng (which works for Nkosi too):

Quayson's term refers to the adversarial, outside perspectives that are not sanctioned by orthodox 'tellings of the nation'. The purview of the ex-centric offers an appropriate experiential vista from which transitional and postcolonial problems can be grappled with (182).

Both writers show their dismay at the turn things took post-apartheid:

They came, the bourgeoisie, the 'made-it', in their fancy clothes and over-fed bodies. They like nothing better than to hear the starved say 'thank you' for the crumbs they flick off and flick with manicured

fingers. Makes them feel affirmed. Regardless of how much of it they consume each moment, they need it some more .... They don't see the misery. Or more truly, they see it and rejoice, makes them know how far off the dust and away they are (Rampolokeng 2017: 66, 67).

Or, in an earlier work, a related idea expressed more obliquely:

i refused the ride on the back of the van white with a stripe of black  
new south african mad machine rattling into the distance of nonsense  
& wanted to feel the ground under my feet once more (Rampolokeng 2005: 77).

Typically, Nkosi's response to the idea of the 'rainbow nation' is gentler or lighter than that of Rampolokeng, speaking perhaps of their generational gap, and of how much further away South Africans now are from the optimism generated by the 'rainbow nation' post-apartheid moment. In an essay 'The Ideology of Reconciliation' first published in 2008, Nkosi wrote:

'Rainbow Nation at peace with itself' is clearly a fiction at odds with reality. Perhaps this was Mandela's way of using the thin glue of ideology to hold together a sorely divided nation .... After nearly two hundred years of social and political conflict, the social space has yet to be reorganised in accordance with the political change that has taken place. And if 'rainbow nation' is simply a description of our multi-coloured ethnic communities rather than a harmonious, equitable share of resources and living space, then 'rainbow nation' may, after all, turn out to be Tutu's and Mandela's grandest fiction! (in Stiebel & Chapman 2016: 152).

In the same essay, Nkosi remarked that to be "consecrated" as a true representative of our country's literary culture, you must promote what has become the state ideology of "reconciliation" (155). Such 'consecration' would require the approval of the critics, including academic adoption in syllabi as an example, and on this count Nkosi and Rampolokeng also find common ground as 'outsiders'. Rampolokeng, always blunter and more direct in his choice of words than Nkosi, talks about the "fuckademics" ... who always try to pin down his words according to certain rules and

categories’ (in Veit-Wild 2006: 86). Nkosi, in reaction to the bias he perceived on the part of some South African critics to his novel *Mating Birds* (1985), had this to say:

for some white critics it was all right for white male writers to ‘narrate’ on black bodies but for black writers to ‘narrate’ on white bodies was a bit too much even for some ‘progressive’ white critics .... Instead of being physically beaten unconscious like Joe Christmas (in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*) you were ‘critically’ ambushed and beaten unconscious by white critics (Graham 2006: 159).

Rampolokeng recognised the dangers of criticising the dominant line as he fell out of favour with the political elite. Mkhize calls this the “‘unofficializing” of Rampolokeng’s poetic voice’ (2011: 193):

Because I was doing my duty just too well, I think, for comfort. In the old days the praise-singers were traditionally the only people in the nation who could criticize the kings and get away with it. That seemed to me a good tradition, one to be followed. But I found that in the political setup in this country today that doesn’t work: if you start introducing criticism then you’re supposed to be reactionary ... counter-revolutionary – although people don’t say counter-revolutionary because the word revolution has itself fallen foul of the politics of this country (quoted in Mkhize 2011: 193 - 194).

Both writers used their words as their weapons – against the critics who were unreceptive, the political transgressions they observed and to make their own position clear:

’cos WORD is dynamite-stick up the parliamentary butt  
POET strikes the light & BOOM & flash is death-flight  
& that was for the critic (Rampolokeng 2012: 26).

## **Words**

This leads me to a final point of comparison and complementarity between Nkosi and Rampolokeng and that is their attention to words, to writing and their results. Nkosi courted controversy relatively early in his career by criticising what he perceived as a dearth of imagination and craft in the work of black South Africans in an essay published in 1965. He started by observing:

With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa. ... Where African music and dance have moved forward, not through renouncing tradition, but by fusing diverse elements in to an integrated whole, black fiction has renounced African tradition without showing itself capable of benefiting from the accumulated example of modern European literature. To put it bluntly, nothing stands behind the fiction of black South Africans – no tradition, whether indigenous, such as energises *The Palm-Wine Drunkard*, or alien, such as is most significantly at work in the latest fiction of Camara Laye (in Stiebel & Chapman 2016: 49).

Given the fact that Nkosi was already in exile when he wrote this, the reception within South Africa was chilly and Nkosi was never really fully reconciled hereafter to the black South African writers of his era, such as Mphahlele for one. How would he have judged the work of a writer such as Rampolokeng years later? Though Nkosi and Rampolokeng attended various writers' festival such as Time of the Writer in Durban in the 2000s, there exists no record (of which I'm aware) of any recorded exchanges or arranged interviews between the two. This is a pity as they would have much to discuss about their shared 'anti-realist' style, with Oliphant's words describing Rampolokeng's writing as 'more than mere protest and moral outrage. It postulates a world different to the one we presently inhabit' (2020: 15) acting as a kind of answer to Nkosi's lament above. This is what Nkosi was after in his inflammatory essay quoted from above – for writers to imagine a different way of getting to a different world; not merely describing in a journalistic fashion what they witnessed in front of them. In an essay 'South African Fiction: writers at the barricades' (1986), Nkosi prophesied that it would take the next generation to push the literary boundaries. He wrote:

It used to be thought that in the struggle against apartheid the strength of black writing in South Africa was the memoir and the autobiography. Peter Abrahams set the pace with *Tell Freedom* (1954), an extraordinarily powerful and lyrical testament about growing up from poverty to freedom under apartheid. In the 50s the genre developed a new impetus ... Alas, since then autobiography seems unaccountably, bizarrely to have gone into a regressive stage of second childhood, made worse by a penchant for mendacity. ... It seems we must now wait for the generation of Soweto, the new children of the stone-thrower and the petrol-bomber, for another spectacular rebirth of the memoir and the autobiography (in Stiebel & Chapman 2016: 236 - 237).

Enter Rampolokeng on cue. Certainly, no one could accuse his work of a lack of ‘vigour of imagination’ or a lack of ‘technical resources’ in responding to ‘the problems posed by conditions in South Africa’ as observed above by Nkosi in relation to ‘protest writing’ of the 60s. When it comes to application to one’s craft, Nkosi – always a perfectionist when it came to his own writing – would have admired Rampolokeng’s application to his oeuvre. In *Bird-Monk Seding*, close in part to a memoir, Rampolokeng shouts in upper case ‘BUNIONS ON MY FINGERS ... I PUT IN A LOT OF WORK ON THE PEN’ (2017: 104), and in a more poignant tone later, ‘I really hope i can, by some stretch of the imagination, be called a “writer” ...’ (134), and, even further along, Rampolokeng – through the narrator – seems to answer Nkosi directly:

Starting out, I wrote because I could not stand what i was reading – uniform in its dearth of imagination, i felt like i was locked behind a marshmallow wall. The padding could be eaten from here to sugar diabetes ... (161).

Nkosi, in a piece entitled ‘How I Write’ (2011), published posthumously and thus written shortly before his death, described writing - a little like Rampolokeng above – as hard work, ‘primarily a struggle with language; words refusing to be made ‘flesh’ ... A lot of it has to do with how words are put together. The rest is a mystery’ (in Stiebel & Chapman 2016: 277). He,

too, refused a saccharine or sanitised version of events in his birth country: of the Truth and Reconciliation accounts he wrote in the essay 'The Republic of Letters' (2002):

Instead of being eternally bathed in a pleasant glow of nostalgia, the past in South Africa is remembered mainly as a bad nightmare ... At the end of the day, there was a 'crime', but no 'punishment'. The truth of recent South African history can only be told in novels of the abyss (Nkosi in Stiebel & Chapman 2016: 139, 146).

Both wordsmiths under discussion worked their craft fully, it appears. And both deliver their messages in a variety of genres which, indeed, reflects a breadth of aesthetic imagination. Nkosi wrote novels, critical essays, some poetry, plays and even a libretto in isiZulu, 'The Chameleon and the Lizard' performed by the London Bach Society in Goldsmiths College in 1971. Rampolokeng also shows an admirable breadth of creativity: known primarily as a poet, he has also written novels, a play *Fanon's Children* (2002) and collaborated with the band The Kalahari Surfers among other musical partners in Brazil, France, South Africa, and elsewhere. Both were known in their day as noteworthy – sometimes difficult – performers. Mofokeng (2020: 76) frankly states:

Rampolokeng is not everyone's cup of tea .... He has been kind to some and very harsh to others. He has been a chauvinist to some women and a passionate man to others .... He ruined a few events and festivals.

Which reminds me of an event when I was hosting Lewis Nkosi at the Cape Town Book Fair: the sold out audience restively awaited a very late entrance by Nkosi who had been discovered in a bar some distance from the venue. My carefully prepared questions were swept aside upon his arrival as he embarked on an hour long riff on his experiences at *Drum* magazine. The audience was entranced, and I the over-prepared academic was completely side-lined, superfluous. As another unpredictable performer, a name that is linked to those of Rampolokeng and Nkosi is that of Dambudzo Marechera, the 'troublemaker'. A common thread, unsurprisingly, for all three when it came to accounts of eruptive, transgressive and disruptive performances in

the past was excessive alcohol consumption. Veit-Wild writes in a memoir of her time with Marechera (2020: 15,16):

You found another kind of home at the Africa Centre near Covent Garden, a hub for London's large African exile community. You went there almost every day to meet people, to drink, talk, read and write. Lewis Nkosi, Ben Okri and Robert Fraser were among your regular drinking companions .... The staff at the centre were initially very supportive. Until you staged some of your more destructive 'performances'. After you smashed the front window with a brick, the director banned you from the premises.

Transgressive behaviour and bold experimentation of styles links to the notion of the carnivalesque in literature, in the Bakhtinian sense. This idea has certainly been linked to the work of Rampolokeng by Veit-Wild (1997, 2006), and also that of Marechera who has just been mentioned, but not usually to Nkosi and his writing. Carnival, following Bakhtin,

turns the world upside-down .... Carnival unites, mixes, and marries the sacred with the profane, the high with the low, the great with the small, the wise with the foolish (in Veit-Wild 1997: 555).

Applied to literature this results in a mix of,

the grotesque and the hybrid, satire and parody, polyphony and ambiguity; the emphasis on the bodily baser instincts, eccentric, abnormal and indecent behaviour, the violation of good manners and social rules (ibid).

Evident in Rampolokeng's 'playful, parodic infiltration and reinterpretation of the master-language' (562), 'carnivalisation' could also be said to pertain in a work such as Nkosi's novel *Mandela's Ego* (2006). The thesis of this last novel is the linking of the protagonist Dumisa's erectile dysfunction and Mandela's incarceration – at a political level, the opposition movement (symbolised by Mandela) is emasculated and impotent; at an individual level, so is Dumisa leading to many sly jokes, references to his frustration, his ridiculous efforts, and final sexual release once the symbolic hero is released from prison.

More violent, strident and scatological than Nkosi, Rampolokeng pushes the carnivalesque in a far more urgent and pointedly political and personal manner in his lines, such as these taken from the poem ‘The rampster comes straight’:

(no government under any firmament worth fundament  
i’m poet not ornament in cabinet/house of parliament)  
...  
it’s another struggle stage  
bungle next age same page  
they spike-indict me never hike but de-mic me  
even dyke me with fluffy buppie rabid puppy  
chuckie acting chummy but white shark in dark facebiting  
& reciting my charms (2019: 118,119).

Both writers overlap in their carnivalesque use of the playful – Nkosi keeps his touch lighter than that of Rampolokeng - but both are fundamentally serious writers, especially when paying attention to words, style and invention. In a work such as his novel *Underground People* (2002), set in the late 1980s during the State of Emergency, Nkosi ‘oscillates between the serious and the comic’ (Oliphant in Stiebel & Gunner 2006: 191) with his use of irony to imagine what might happen in a society escalating into armed conflict. It is a novel about the gap between revolutionary theory and revolutionary action, about betrayal and liberation, which is illusory. It is unlike anything written at the same time about what Nkosi would have called ‘the realities of South Africa’, especially in its use of irony, bathos and destabilization of expectations. Both writers can, therefore, be said to correspond to the following observation: ‘An abnormal reality demands an abnormal literary form and language, a position taken by many postcolonial authors’ (Veit-Wild 1997: 564). This harks back to Nkosi’s criticism of black South African writers whereby he suggested that the abnormalities of apartheid South Africa required a non-realistic, different kind of imagining to bring them to life for the reader; and Rampolokeng’s rejection of the ‘marshmallow wall’ of dull writing leading to the symbolic sickness of ‘sugar diabetes’ both referred to above. Both writers, using different but similarly imaginative tools, criticise those who ape those who were once masters; both look to a better future.



## **Conclusion**

To conclude on a lighter note, both writers under discussion occasionally found that ‘better space’ in jazz music, surely a strong link between them. A whole chapter on its own could be written about this but I am not the one to do it. Suffice to say that both writers find one of their jazz meeting points in the music of the *Drum* era and times: for Nkosi, the jitterbug and Todd Matshikiza’s jazz opera *King Kong*, plus ‘an underground jazz music ... bursting the seams of apartheid’ (Nkosi in Stiebel & Chapman 2015: 37); for Rampolokeng these lines:

Let them sleep who are tired  
Beam me back to ’59. Jazzing it up in Revolution  
Line and time. We are wired (2017: 157).

‘Wired’ both these writers were, and are, for readers both yesterday and today. Both men, in their resistance to political and social complacency, their embrace of the experimental especially in their writing and their essentially ‘outsider’ status, not to mention their ‘fatherless’ beginnings, find relevance in today’s South Africa, a generation apart.

## **References**

- Demir, D. (ed.). 2020. *Horns for Hondo* at 30. *BKO Magazine* 4,3, Special Edition.
- Demir, D. 2020. *Horns for Hondo* at 30: Introduction in Three Fragments. *BKO Magazine* 4,3: 4 - 7.
- Eisenhuth, F. 2021. Artist Biography: Lesego Rampolokeng. [www.allmusic.com](http://www.allmusic.com) (Accessed on 07 September 2021.)
- Lomdardozi, L. 2021. Lewis Nkosi the Motherless Child. In Starck-Adler, A. & D. Henrichsen (eds.): *Lewis Nkosi Black Psychiatrist/ Flying Home! Texts, Perspectives, Homage*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien.
- Mkhize, K. 2011. Neither History nor Freedom Will Absolve Us: On the Ethical Dimensions of the Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng. *Safundi* 12,2: 179 - 202.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2011.557192>
- Mofokeng, P. 2020. 'It takes a ripple to make a storm': A Reflection on Lesego Rampolokeng's Poetry. *BKO Magazine* 4,3: 74 - 76.
- Molver, Z. 2006. Interview with Lewis Nkosi, 25 October 2002. In Stiebel, L. & L. Gunner (eds.): *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.  
[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401202091\\_023](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401202091_023)
- Moreillon, O. 2020. Ranting out of Love: Some Notes on Lesego Rampolokeng's *blue v's*. *BKO Magazine* 4,3: 22 - 29.
- Oliphant, A. 2006. Mammon and God: Reality, Imagination and Irony in Underground People. In Stiebel, L. & L. Gunner (eds.): *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.  
[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401202091\\_020](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401202091_020)
- Oliphant, A. [1990] 2020. Acerbic Poems of Lesego Rampolokeng: *Horns for Hondo* – Introduction. Reprinted in Demir, D. (ed). *BKO Magazine* 4,3: 13 - 15.
- Rampolokeng, L. 2005. *Whiteheart: Prologue to Hysteria*. Grahamstown: Deep South.  
<https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.100.0276>
- Rampolokeng, L. 2012. *Head on Fire: Rants/ Notes/ Poems 2001 - 2011*. Grahamstown: Deep South.
- Rampolokeng, L. 2017. *Bird-Monk Seding*. Grahamstown: Deep South.
- Rampolokeng, L. [1999] 2019. *The Bavino Sermons*. Grahamstown: Deep South.
- Starck-Adler, A. & D. Henrichsen (eds.). 2021. *Lewis Nkosi The Black Psychiatrist/ Flying Home! Texts, Perspectives, Homage*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien.
- Stiebel, L. & L. Gunner (eds.). 2006. *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401202091>
- Stiebel, L. & T. Steffen (eds.). 2014. *Letters to My Native Soil: Lewis Nkosi Writes Home (2001 - 2009)*. Zurich: LIT Verlag.
- Stiebel, L. & M. Chapman (eds.). 2016. *Writing Home: Lewis Nkosi on South African Writing*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Veit-Wild, F. 1997. Carnival and Hybridity in Texts by Dambudzo Marechera and Lesego Rampolokeng. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23,4: 553 - 564.

*A Comparative View of Lewis Nkosi and Lesego Rampolokeng*

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057079708708557>

Veit-Wild, F. 2006. *Writing Madness: Borderlines of the Body in African Literature*. London: James Currey.

Veit-Wild, F. 2020. *They Called You Dambudzo: A Memoir*. Auckland Park: Jacana.

Wikipedia 2021. Lesego Rampolokeng. <https://en.wikipedia.org> (Accessed on 07 September 2021.)

Professor Lindy Stiebel  
Professor Emeritus of English Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Durban  
[stiebell@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:stiebell@ukzn.ac.za)