

Editorial

‘The Word is Paramount’: Reflecting on Lesego Rampolokeng’s *Oeuvre*

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This *Alternation* special focus on poet, playwright, and novelist Lesego Rampolokeng’s *oeuvre* is the first academic one of its kind. Although Rampolokeng’s writing career has spanned over 3 decades and despite the significance of his work within the lineage of Black Consciousness writing and perhaps as ‘building a bridge’ between previous generations and the new generation of poets in South Africa, his work has been largely under-researched.

This special issue can perhaps be seen as continuation of conversations began in a special issue of *BKO Magazine* 2020, entitled *Horns for Hondo at 30*, in which different versions of my own, Olivier Moreillon’s, and Warrick Swinney’s pieces were published. It should be seen as a start of what will hopefully continue to be a fruitful conversation on a vast and manifold body of work. Whereas this special issue very much focuses on Rampolokeng’s work of the 1990s (Moreillon’s, Ayub Sheik’s and Sinney’s pieces in particular), and his later writing (Demir and Swinney), it is my hope that future reflections on Rampolokeng’s work will focus on works such as *Blackheart*, *Bantu Ghost*, and *Head on Fire*, for example.

Lindy Stiebel’s piece compares Rampolokeng’s life and work to that of Lewis Nkosi. This opens up exciting new avenues of comparative analysis of Rampolokeng’s work to other (South) African writers. It would be interesting to read his work side by side with both writers from the Black Consciousness era, such as Mafika Gwala and Keorapetse Kgositse, but also with more recent writers such as Dolla Sapeta.

Thus, this special issue is by no means complete and can only be seen as perhaps pointing to future conversations, to more reflections to come, and

is, for now, the start of a gathering of thoughts on an important body of work for South African writing.

As usual, we provide the abstracts of the articles of this issue of *Alternation*, below for convenient reference.



In ‘Stick-fighting against Extinction: *End Beginnings* and Other Dada Nihilismus Polemics’, Warrick Swinney seeks to provide a personal context to the enigmatic life of the poet and writer Lesego Rampolokeng. The essay divides into three sections which he calls ‘Foreground’, ‘Middleground’ and ‘Background’, which provide a loose framework for a set of parameters around which to peg this (auto)biographic narrative. Swinney met Lesego through various politics/ music/ poetry events, revolving around the Shifty Recording Studio – of which he was a partner – during the late 1980s, and developed a body of work which they performed in South Africa, Europe and Brazil. He continues to maintain friendship relations with Lesego.

The ‘Foreground’ frames the piece by bringing in a recent incident, a reality context, around which a theoretical concept for Lesego’s work can be applied. The incident which introduces us to the violence that underpins daily life in South Africa, and more specifically, to Lesego’s reaction; it foreshadows a source of his work, which is a background of juvenile preparedness to meet inevitable violence. The ‘Foreground’ also introduces the reader to the premise that he could be more usefully categorised as being a dadaist or surrealist than the epithets of ‘struggle’, ‘praise’ or ‘dub’ poet, that so are readily reached for when dealing with his work. Our 2009 performance at the ‘Dada South? Experimentation, Radicalism and Resistance’ exhibition at the Iziko Gallery in Cape Town frames much of this section.

The ‘Middleground’, then, is the substance of Swinney’s understanding of Lesego’s biography, and an analytical look at his work and his influences. Swinney examines the album *End Beginnings*, which they did together, in 1990, and the socio-political circumstances around it. He touches on work with William Kentridge on *Faustus in Africa*, and Lesego’s pact with the devil; his frightening Catholic ambience, the trilogy of God, Man and the State which permeates his work. He looks, too, at his fall from favour with the ruling party, throwing his lot in with the Black Consciousness Movement, a

more sympathetic home for philosophers and poets. This section analyses his past writing and how it progresses and informs more current work – where poetry gives way to prose. The semi-biographic novel *Bird Monk Seding* (2017) was the most recent at the time of writing this article and, more than any other work of his, emphasises the ‘graphic’ in autobiographic. Readings from *A Half Century Thing*, a book of poems written during 2017, gave rise to a new set of recordings which became the album, *Bantu Rejex* which is also examined.

The third section, ‘Background’ looks at the historical landscape of the arts and the role of poetry during the struggle years and at some of Lesego’s major influences and the formative events of the time. This section also discusses some of the recording studio technology used to make the album and focuses on two songs to see how they were put together. It also looks at another important poet of the time, Mzwakhe Mbuli, how he shaped a specific audience and demand for the performance poetry of the era, and how that differed from Lesego’s trajectory.

The title of this essay quotes a line from the close of ‘Broederbondage’ in the book *Talking Rain* (1993), ‘We’re stickfighting against extinction’, spliced together with the title of Amiri Baraka’s famous ‘Black Dada Nihilismus’ poem, a Lesego favourite.

When Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer wanted to drag Rampolokeng off to her personal analyst, he questioned, ‘is it me or the things I write about that is sick?’. Indeed, Rampolokeng’s acerbic poetry, a mongrelized, polyglot invective against hegemonic Western discourses, social injustice, tyranny and corruption, is striking for its grotesque and surreal imagery, scatological diction and the eschewing of conventional forms of poetry. The nihilistic impulse to destroy oppression, racism and its attendant ideologies, is mostly situated in post-apartheid South Africa and is scripted in a macabre litany of activism and indignation. The narratorial voices of subversion/ inversion of social and political hierarchies satirize, parody and decry inhumanity: ‘I look out on vultures pecking their souls fleshless’ (Rampolokeng 1990:1). His subjectivity deftly manipulates African oral stylistics, Jamaican dub poetry, American ghetto rap, jazz and contemporary popular music in irreverent, intertextual abandon. In **‘Word Bomber Supreme! Textual Strategies of Nihilism in the Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng’**, Ayub Sheik critiques Ramolokeng’s textual strategies of subversion that undermine hegemonic

discourses and privilege the downtrodden masses. In doing so, it reflects upon the nihilistic impulse to eradicate injustice, elitism and dogma and validate a thesis that the passion for destruction is paradoxically a creative impulse for a more humane, compassionate and just world order.

In **‘Of Solitude, Non-Places, and Mutations, in/ and Lesego Rampolokeng’s Poetry of the Nineties’**, **Olivier Moreillon** looks at how Rampolokeng mixes creative non-fiction and literary criticism and offers a reflection on Lesego Rampolokeng’s poetry of the nineties. It combines an account of a personal visit to Solitude Palace near Stuttgart, where Rampolokeng spent some time in the late nineties as a writer in residence, at Solitude Academy, and the analysis of selected poems, claiming that aspects of solitude and the solitary subject are a golden thread in Rampolokeng’s work. Moreillon sees in Rampolokeng’s poetry a harsh but intimate engagement with South Africa’s (post)apartheid conditions, where the violence and brutality become a means of rendering the lyrical I’s un-ease and dis-comfort with South Africa’s rainbow nation.

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. In **‘Lewis, meet Lesego: A Comparative View of Lewis Nkosi (1936-2010) and Lesego Rampolokeng (b.1965)’**, **Lindy Stiebel** 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.

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