

‘Before the Crimson Downpour’: Reflections on Lesego Rampolokeng’s *Oeuvre* in Three Fragments

Danyela Dimakatso Demir

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3397-2266>

Abstract

The opening reflections to this special issue on Lesego Rampolokeng’s *oeuvre* will give glimpses into themes that readers of his work have been engaging with and forays into new conversations around the work which readers will hopefully carry forward on different platforms. The themes and concepts that I will explore are by no means exhaustive readings of Rampolokeng’s *oeuvre* but are central in order to make sense of such a multi-layered and complex body of work. I will focus on three central issues in his work: lineages and legacies, global Black Consciousness, and gender dynamics/writing women.

Keywords: Lesego Rampolokeng, Black Consciousness, Gender dynamics, Communal mourning, South African Literature

In his review of Lesego Rampolokeng’s *Bantu Ghost*, ‘Post-Freedom Dreams and Nightmares’, Mphutlane wa Bofelo aptly writes that ‘one could not help but come to the conclusion that Lesego Rampolokeng is to literature and theatre what Fanon and Biko are to socio-political analysis and activism’ (2020: 36). This powerful statement has always resonated with me and yet, whilst many full-length studies, special issues, and monographs on Biko and Fanon have been written (at times they have perhaps been over-studied), this part special issue is the first academic gathering of words which is primarily dedicated to Rampolokeng’s *oeuvre*. The articles are attempts at commemorating, reflecting on, and engaging with Rampolokeng’s *oeuvre* more than 30 years after the publication of his first book, *Horns for Hondo*, in 1990.

My introductory reflections will hopefully provide a glimpse into themes that readers of Rampolokeng's work have been engaging with and beginnings of new conversations around his work, which we must carry forward on different platforms. The themes and concepts that I will attempt to reflect upon are by no means an exhaustive reading of his *oeuvre*, but rather ideas, sketches, and readings that are to me central in order to make sense of such a multi-layered and complex body of work. I will primarily engage with three to my mind central issues in his work: lineages and legacies which are of importance to all the essays gathered here; global Black Consciousness; and gender dynamics/ writing women. The contributors of this special issue deal with other central themes in, and perspectives on, his work, such as writing from the margins/the writer as in/outsider whilst writing from within the centre back to the centre (Olivier Moreillon) and the centrality of music and musicality for/in his work (Warrick Sony). The importance of his writing as reflection of struggles of the oppressed and as mirror to society is what runs through all articles like a golden thread. However, although this special issue is an attempt at celebrating and thinking through multiple dimensions within Rampolokeng's *oeuvre*, it should only be seen as a momentous force to drive an ongoing conversation about his work and should thus be read as fragments, as ideas, and as beginnings of a more rigorous conversation about Rampolokeng's work and its significance for South African literary history.

Fragment One: Lineages and Legacies

One of the most fascinating things that I found about Rampolokeng's writing when I immersed myself in his *oeuvre* in 2017 was that I could hear a global gathering of rich echoes of artistic voices: Antonin Artaud, William Burroughs, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and, perhaps more faintly, Sarah Kane and even Federico García Lorca. Most central to his *oeuvre* are, as the narrator in *Bird-Monk Seding* writes, Black artists with a 'social conscience' (Rampolokeng 2017: 18). The narrator, Bavino Sekete, in fact provides us with Rampolokeng's artistic lineage when he explains:

... 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 Mbutelo Mzamane's 'Mzala'. Matshoba first dealt with ghetto reality at whitelight, searing, excoriating, burn-the-place-down line-them-up-I'll-shoot-them level. Mzamane made me realise that life grows, even at the most despicable, revolting, clown-in-the-sewer-sucking-on-faecal-matter level. My gutter anthem was the ultimate poem of my black consciously-reaching-for-selfhood clays, 'Afrika My Beginning' by Ingoapele Madingoane (Rampolokeng 2017:18).

This rich lineage is what I find challenging and fascinating at the same time. For the dedicated readers, Rampolokeng's work is a chance and a call to enrich ourselves both in fictional and critical writing. I found myself going back to familiar texts, such as Fanon and Artaud, and studying rigorously texts previously not known to me, such as Mafika Gwala's poetry and Aimé Césaire's writings. However, Rampolokeng's writing, though it is a form of teaching, is by no means didactic. Many of his works are not only commentaries on the socio-economic state of the oppressed (particularly in South Africa), but also lessons in art. I have tried to grasp this particular phenomenon in Rampolokeng's work, to give it a name, a definition (as most academics would). Of course, he author is using intertextual and intermedial devices, like every other text, Rampolokeng's work is a palimpsest. In this case, the palimpsest serves to highlight the archival memory of writers and other artists that came before Rampolokeng. However, I feel that this call to remember and commemorate his lineage has another layer on a formal level: I suggest calling the tracing of Rampolokeng's own lineage and the legacy he is leaving for himself and us as readers 'lyrical criticism'. His commentary on the arts, his teachings of writers both from the margins and the centre through references and allusions, are more often than not delivered in poetic form. Thus, in contrast to concepts such as critical fabulations, lyrical criticism is written in verse form. It is not a blend of essayistic and narrative writing. It is pure verse form, the theoretical observations, the philosophical deliberations are all conveyed to us as a poem. Not as a blend of different genres. It is simultaneously a hybrid genre, situated at the interstice of poetry and critical engagement within cultural and literary studies. It resists and defies academic conventions. Simultaneously, it consists of cultural, artistic, and philosophical theory on a level which must be regarded as at least as valuable and significant for literary and cultural studies as more canonical approaches to theory. Lyrical theory is also a valuable tool in order to think

through the importance of the archive, archival 'gaps', and 'marginal (his)stories' within the archive in and on Ram-polokeng's body of work.

I find two of Rampolokeng's works particularly striking in this regard: *Bantu Ghost* (2009) and *A Half Century Thing* (2015). Both texts can be situated at the threshold of theory and creative writing. Wa Bofelo rightly points out that *Bantu Ghost* 'started as a tribute to Steve Biko but ended as homage to black thinkers who have made a contribution to theorisation on the Black experience' (wa Bofelo 2020:31). The play is thus not only an elegy to Steve Biko, but also a rich archival monument to other Black thinkers across the globe, such as Frantz Fanon, Sonia Sánchez, and Aimé Césaire, to name but a few. Like inscriptions in a monument, quotes by these and other thinkers are woven into Rampolokeng's own poetry and thus form a lineage of writers that inform his thinking, bring to the fore his political stance, and point the readers to these literary ancestors, so that we may learn about, remember, and celebrate this particular artistic legacy, and by implication, form a part of it, be it as writers, teachers, or critics.

Rampolokeng uses similar techniques of tracing his lineage and in this case perhaps leaving his own legacy in print in his 2015 poetry volume *A Half Century Thing*. The cover is an image of Phefeni in Orlando West, Rampolokeng's birthplace, and in 'Theatric Sticks & Powdered Bones' he speaks about his birthplace when the lyrical I says: 'so ... I took to Staffriding ... all the way from Phefeni to HERE' (Rampolokeng 2015:82). The volume is also a celebration of Rampolokeng's 50th birthday and the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Horns for Hondo*, all indications that this book is not only speaking of legacies that other writers have left behind, but also of his own.

A Half Century Thing is lyrical criticism that engages with various themes, such as (South) African literary history, hip-hop, oppression, inequality, and the quotidian lives of Black people. Perhaps the strongest section of the book are the poems for South African poets Keorapetse Kgositsile ('Base for bra Willie'), Mafika Gwala ('Libation Blues for Mista Gwala'), Mongane Wally Serote ('Word to Serote'), and Seitlhamo Motsapi ('Earth Shallow Solo for Seitlhamo'). The poems do not only allude to music through their titles, but are crossing genres in form and style. They are praise songs and partly resurrections of texts that have been largely neglected in South African literary history. Although both Kgositsile and Serote have been, through their status as poets laureate, more 'visible' in the South

African literary landscape, there have been few engagements with particularly their earlier works and most of their works from the 70s and 80s are out of print¹. Mafika Gwala has been hopelessly understudied and were it not for South African History Online, his work would have been unavailable to the current generation of readers. I am not aware of a full-length study on Gwala's work, although, as Warrick Sony mentions in his piece published in this special issue, Rampolokeng is currently writing on Gwala's *oeuvre*, thus ensuring that Gwala's importance not only be stressed in the form of lyrical criticism, but also in somewhat more 'conventional' academic circles.

Seitlhamo Motsapi is perhaps the least known of the four writers. He has written one book of poems and has since been a less visible figure in the South African literary landscape. Rampolokeng's four poems/lyrical dedications are, much like *Bantu Ghost*, an archival preservation, a repository of knowledge, a tapestry of commemoration and remembrance as a tribute to otherwise marginalised voices and texts.

Fragment 2: Black Consciousness as a Global Movement

In a conversation between Mafika Gwala and Lesego Rampolokeng², Gwala states that we need a 'better Black Consciousness' (Gwala & Rampolokeng 2014). Both he and Rampolokeng agree that it is important to think of Black Consciousness in a global context. Gwala stresses that:

Vietnam was an essential part of our struggle. Because from there we could learn something like black consciousness should not be around colour. It should be around the natural struggle of people wanting identity themselves as a whole. Same with the Cubans. The Cubans taught us that we had to stand on our own because we wouldn't liberate ourselves if we always thought that some people were doing it for us.

¹ Kgositsile's selected works were posthumously published by Xara Books as *Home Soil in my Blood* (2018). Besides, Uhuru Phalafala, whose PhD focuses on Kgositsile's poetry, is currently working on a monograph on his *oeuvre*.

² I am quoting here from the version which appears on the homepage of Chimurenga (Chimurenga Chronic 2014) Parts of the conversation also appear in Rampolokeng's documentary *Word Down the Line* (2014), directed by Bobby Rodwell.

And it even came to Cuito Cuanavale. Cuito Cuanavale taught us that now was the dead-end street. There was no going further. It meant open confrontation with the system, against the system.

The people of Guinea Bissau, they taught us lots of things. They taught us tolerance. They were divided, a diverse society actually. But within that society they sought unity and they readily found it because they were honest with their principles (Gwala & Rampolokeng 2014).

Rampolokeng's work embraces and carries forward Gwala's philosophy of looking outward from within. As a middle Eastern woman who grew up in Germany, I am often struck by how much his work – although, of course, rooted in South Africa – speaks to me beyond my present context of being at home in South Africa. I remember clearly how I was transported back to Rostock in 1992 when listening to Rampolokeng and the Kalahari Surfers' *Bantu Rejex* (on this see also Demir 2020: 46). I felt a sense of solidarity and a shared refusal to forget the tragedy and injustice of Rostock, a town in East Germany which saw dozens of refugees and migrants murdered by Neo Nazis in 1992, 25 years before the release of *Bantu Rejex*.

In *Horns for Hondo* the lyrical I says: 'israel is fresh in my mind/ a god that left carnage behind/ only to push it to the palestinian front/ to make another nation bear the brunt/ I weep for Palestine/ & humanity turned bovine' (Rampolokeng 1990:32). These are only two of many instances of solidarity, of grief for the oppressed, and anger against oppression in the world. As I write elsewhere, inspired by scholars such as Shinhee Han and David Eng, the melancholic refusal to forget the past serves both as a form of elegy and as ethical response to preserve the memory of the struggle of the oppressed (Demir 2022). I have only chosen examples that speak particularly to me and my context. But Rampolokeng's work is constantly inward- and outward-looking at the same time, that is to say, although the setting is more often than not local, the text looks out into the world and is a testimony of Rampolokeng's direct literary and political lineage to Gwala's definition of Black Consciousness. It is therefore not surprising that Rampolokeng's work speaks to a global readership, that those of us who have experienced violence, oppression, and racial denigration elsewhere can relate to his words. To my mind, this global solidarity, both on an artistic as well as on a political level, is a hopeful, empowering, and propelling aspect of his work that has often been overlooked by critics.

It is this global outlook which makes me return to Rampolokeng's work time and again, often in moments of crises and despair, such as when an explosion hit Beirut on the 4th of August 2020. I reread 'Lines for Vincent' (1998) and think of the revolution and the subsequent betrayal that many people in Beirut have felt before, but particularly after the 4th of August 2020. It is a bitter reminder that our lives the world over are precarious and expendable. 'Lines for Vincent' is an elegy for the lyrical I's cousin who was part of the Sasol Three and who was betrayed by someone within the resistance movement. Vincent's death and the fact that his body was never found as '[they] buried an empty coffin to symbolise' (Rampolokeng 1999:7) and thus neither the lyrical I nor Vincent's mother could find closure, reaches out to what happened decades later in Beirut through time and space where the hope of the beginning of a revolution was crushed by that explosion in August. While reading 'Lines for Vincent', I felt, if not comforted, then at least not alone in my grief and the knowledge that, perhaps, through global solidarity not only on social media and quickly fading posts, but in poetry, we could be on a journey which entails what José Esteban Munoz calls 'communal mourning' (Munoz 1999:73), a global mourning, perhaps. This global grief, then, which arises from a place of love for each other as oppressed people, has, as has been evident in the global movement of Black Lives Matter and in global solidarity with Palestine, for instance, led and must further lead to global solidarity and militancy. Here Douglas Crimp's words, although spoken in a different context, come to my mind: 'Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning and militancy' (Crimp 1980:18). So then, might this be what Gwala is demanding of us when he says we need a 'better Black Consciousness', which is echoed in Rampolokeng's *oeuvre*: a global togetherness in grief, mourning, solidarity, and ultimately, a call for action?

I see Rampolokeng's gestures of moving outward, both in terms of socio-political commentary and drawing on a rich legacy of cultural thinkers as a step forward within the (South) African literary landscape. Of course, Rampolokeng is joined by other voices in this endeavour, although they vary vastly in style and technique. A poignant example is Mandla Langa's *The Lost Language of the Soul* (2021), which has a deep-seated pan Africanist and Black Consciousness outlook, as well as many works by Zoe Wicomb, which are often set between South Africa and Great Britain, for instance. However, there remain questions and reflections to be made on what a 'better Black Consciousness' might look like in more detail in order to move

forward. How can we achieve a 'better', or perhaps 'different' Black Consciousness that draws on both Gwala's and Rampolokeng's thinking and that builds on it further? Thus, when Busuku's child character in 'The Impaled Night Sky' asks the simple yet profound question: 'Are we there yet?' (Busuku 2020:60), we cannot yet respond in the affirmative, but perhaps we can say that we will be getting there.

Fragment 3: Writing Women

I began engaging with Rampolokeng's *oeuvre* in 2017 and I remember many conversations which started on a light note and ended with a taste of discomfort. Often, when particularly women writers asked me what my area of research was and I responded that I had been thinking of writing an essay on Rampolokeng's *oeuvre*, the response was more often than not: 'Why? He is violent. The writing is sexist. The language misogynistic.' After a time of not being quite able to express what caused my discomfort with this response, I felt, and still feel, that it is two things which I, as a scholar of Rampolokeng's work, have had to grapple with. Firstly, and this is easier for me to respond to than the second aspect, I felt that many times readers, particularly of poetry it would seem, conflate the writer and the person (and in Rampolokeng's case there is a third level of conflation happening, namely the performer, that is to say the stage persona with the man himself). My view is that, to reiterate what Olivier Moreillon (2020:24) also stresses in his piece on *blue v's* in *BKO* and Barthes, the author is dead. It is tempting to conflate Rampolokeng the performer on stage who 'takes up space' and who exudes a more than self-confident aura during his readings with the person off stage and the lyrical I in his poetry and the first person narrators in his novel(s). I thus agree with the British playwright Sarah Kane that 'if they don't know what to say about the work, they go for the writer' (Rebellato 1998, 02:38-02:41).

The second issue is less easy to put aside. It is a question that arises both out of the conversations I described in the beginning of this fragment and through having studied Rampolokeng's *oeuvre* for almost five years now: What happens to women in his writing? How does he write women? Am I, as a woman of colour, disturbed by the representation of women? Of equal importance is the question as to why there is a silence, a haunting gap, almost a refusal to write about gender issues and the representation of women in Rampolokeng's *oeuvre* by critics across gender and race. Because I find

this gap more jarring and disquieting than some of the graphic content in Rampolokeng's *oeuvre*, but more so because the women in his *oeuvre* haunt and fascinate me in equal measure, I must attempt to begin to fill this gap, to speak about the women.

Unlike many women I have spoken to, it is not the violent language which unsettles me throughout Rampolokeng's *oeuvre*. Reading words like 'fucking', 'bitch', and 'cunt' does not cause outrage in me as a reader. Reading violent sexual scenes does not shock me as much as it perhaps does other readers. After all, I read Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and Philip Ridley long before I encountered a single poem by Rampolokeng. No, it is not the same issue that most women have with his work and who (almost) feel repulsed by his writing that disturbs me. I find it much more disquieting to read moments during which women are abused and brutalised and to, at times, feel a gap in the writing, of empathy and compassion on the part of the narrators. In *Blackheart*, for instance, which is Rampolokeng's first published novel, the following scene leaves me cold and trembling:

she's near breaking point. let her break. shatter. fragment. Million
bloodsplashedpieces. i watch her. i've done all bleeding week.
through the lens her face is drawn. stretched out. tight. death mask.
she looks around. furtive. time after bleeding time she darts her eyes
around. a trapped mouse. i feel her fear. touch her fright. smell her
panic. the taste of it in my mouth. my stomach rumbles. thunder
coming to her. a mad train. hurtling through time caught in a
jammed moment. electric failure. avalanche. stampede. rockfall. she
looks at me. straight. she can't see me though her eyes are wide.
graves. dark is my friend. she's a deer. frightened. those eyes are
going to pop. i can make them pop. burst. explode. scatter to hit the
distant wall (Rampolokeng 2005:6).

This (surreal) scene of violence is particularly jarring because the violence seems gratuitous, because the readers do not know about the relationship of the couple before this scene. It is also disconcerting because the narrator derives pleasure from the woman's fear and vulnerability. He displays an unsettling 'libidinal investment in violence' (Hartman 2008:6) while the woman is frightened to death.

The scene is also distressing because the narrator is cold and unmoved by the murder he is about to commit or that he desires to commit.

I say desires because in an unexpected twist it turns out that it might be the woman who murdered the man (Rampolokeng 2004:8). Thus, the readers are left wondering as to what really happened, as to whether this scene is 'real' at all or whether it is a no less frightening but mere wishful desire on the narrator's part.

All of Rampolokeng's novels at times work with uncanny doublings, repetitions and haunted/haunting imagery that appear in all four novels in different shapes and guises. Thus, when reading the above quoted excerpt I am painfully reminded of the opening scene in *Whiteheart*, where the child narrator experiences a similar moment of violence, only that this time it is his mother who is being abused at the hands of her partner:

i heard a sickening crack of bone and saw the blow split my mother's lip and throw her against the wall. he had a grin on his face as he advanced. in the next room my sister screamed the walls down. it came down hard inside my head. trying to break out. my mother was not crying anymore. the walls were. red as the sun crashed down through the torn curtains. he kicked her in the stomach & i saw her body heave itself off the weeping wall and crash out through her mouth. his mouth twisted to the side in disgust. it was a mass of twitches when the smell of vomit clung to the air. i was not crying anymore. i heard her say she loved him. my mother's pupils rolled out of sight. it was pain when she slithered down. slowly. softly. i thought i heard the rain come down hard beyond the walls. but it wasn't. he was a big man, & us? we were so small. all of us. i heard the walls crack. those blows slashing into my mother's flesh opened holes in my soul i'm still trying to close (Rampolokeng 2006:1).

Bavino, the child narrator, is not only a witness but also a victim of abuse here as his stepfather turns violent towards him when the boy attempts to protect his mother (2006:1 - 2). It seems to me that in *Blackheart*, the narrator's and his mother's traumatic experience is – reminiscent of the concept of trauma such as posited by Sigmund Freud and later Cathy Caruth – (in phantasmagorical forms) relived by the adult narrator. However, I do not posit the clichéd notion that abused children become abusers themselves here. Rather, I see this doubling or mirroring of the scenes as a sign of a post-traumatic stress disorder. According to Caruth (1996:11):

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century. As a consequence of the increasing occurrence of such perplexing war experiences and other catastrophic responses during the last twenty years, physicians and psychiatrists have begun to reshape their thinking about physical and mental experience, including most recently the responses to a wide variety of other experiences, such as rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on, that are now often understood in terms of the effects of *post-traumatic stress disorder*.

The surreal, dream-like section in *Blackheart*, where we do not know whether the abuse actually happens or if it is a wishful fantasy on the narrator's part, points to my theory of PTSD being at play here. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Demir 2019:2022), based on scholars such as Irene Visser, Michela Borzaga and Ewald Mengel, and Antjie Krog amongst others, trauma in the postcolony is somewhat more complicated than Freud and Caruth would have it. Trauma experienced by oppressed people cannot be 'pinned down' to 'sudden or catastrophic events' (Caruth 1996:11) that occur throughout one particular phase in a person's life, but we should rather think of it as 'layers of trauma' (Krog *et al.* 2009). These 'layers' of traumatic experiences haunt the readers of Rampolokeng's novels, like apparitions that are impossible to forget. In *Bird-Monk Seding*, for instance, the narrator Bavino Sekete writes about his childhood:

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, fueled by their own emasculation they had left on me. I carry the scars on my back, face, body as a reminder (Rampolokeng 2017: 18).

When I read *Bird-Monk Seding* and *Whiteheart* side by side – for I have

realised that this is how I must read Rampolokeng's novels – it becomes clear to me that the abuse that the narrator in *Whiteheart* both witnesses and experiences is not a singular, traumatic event, but that it is repeated throughout his childhood and thus these layers of trauma are also relived and repeated in uncanny and paralysing ways in the narrator's later life, not only in the jarring scene in *Blackheart* that I have spoken about, but in another doubling or echo of that very scene in *Greyheart*: 'he vomited. the ringside audience screamed. the vomit splashed her tight-fitting neckline, ran down her dress. he vomited again and she screamed her eyes popping. he thought they were going to jump out. he wanted to see them smash against him. wanted to feel her juice on his hot face' (Rampolokeng 2022:56).

And though the narrator's posttraumatic stress explains these chilling instances of abusive repetition and of acting out and reliving trauma, still the way in which women are described here is horrifying and alienating to read.

Other scenes where women are central to the narrative are much less clear cut, however. Or at least, in contrast to the scenes in *Whiteheart* and *Greyheart* I feel that there is a poetics of empathy and care at play throughout some of the passages. *Bird-Monk Seding* describes a terrifying gang rape of a young girl when the narrator, Bavino Sekete, remembers his childhood:

Happiness, all good & nice in the neighbourhood. Hormonal riot coming on, we went there & got into it, making out. That was the night of my vaginal circumcision. Odd as it may seem. I took a thrust, pain shot through my groin, like dynamite blasting my crotch. Like some razor had gone slash in my loins. I left the place with blood on my pants-front & flowing from under my eye cos then, these guys, friends of mine, came in & stuck an Okapi in my back, demanding that i get off so they could get on, wanting to run train. Memories of shit i would rather drop except to say i got cut, the one with the knife was trying to poke my eye out, i think. Well, they too carry reminders of that night. We all do, hearts heavy with piled-up crap (Rampolokeng 2017:8).

I ask myself, along with different friends who have read the novel: What of the girl? What happened to the girl? We know what happens to the narrator, but where is she? And when I return to *Whiteheart*, I find her. I have spoken

about her often. But only now do I realise that it is the same girl because the gang rape scenes in *Whiteheart* and *Bird-Monk Seding* are so similar. The difference is, however, that the younger narrator in *Whiteheart*, the child through whose eyes we see the gang rape happening, is more empathetic, in search for answers as to what happens to the girl, than the more mature, distanced, and perhaps jaded narrator in *Bird-Monk Seding*.

So, what happens to the girl? Who is she? The girl who, as I write elsewhere about Vincent in 'Lines for Vincent' (1998), seems to melancholically haunt Rampolokeng's texts (Demir 2022)? In *Whiteheart*, the readers find out that the girl's father rapes and violates her in unspeakable ways and that she, in an act of what John Berger in a different context describes as 'undefeated despair' (2006), proceeds to season and cook the dead body of her tormentor after he mysteriously dies – or she might have killed him; the readers are presented with two versions – whilst raping her, a horrifying, graphic moment of melancholic incorporation of a lost, in this case perhaps never had, object of love. However, she is stopped in her tracks. The narrator states:

working away like the cook she'd been since early childhood for a long time while the neighbours drawn by the foul stench of it all came pounding on the doors. but they hadn't done that when he'd been causing her pain. they knocked shouted & then broke down the door to find her laughing & crying aloud into the night. it hasn't dawned yet. she's in the mental asylum. i was there. they call it a centre for the rehabilitation of the mentally handicapped. she's no mental cripple. disturbed they call it at times. but it goes beyond mere disturbance for me. way away & beyond even an upheaval. it's more than one long eternal psychological explosion at work on that human system. it goes deeper than any psychiatry textbook will ever delve to explore (Rampolokeng 2006:9).

Here moments of empathy and grief for the girl are clearly visible on the narrator's part. The horrific violence that she experiences at the hands of her father and other men is clearly edged in his body and mind. And yet, it is unsettling that the girl remains unnamed, that she eventually seems to disappear because the narrator does not see her in the psychiatric ward when he is there, and that this disappearance is mimicked in *Bird-Monk Seding*, for her story has faded from the pages, replaced by the narrator's trauma after

having witnessed the gang rape. These disappearances of women, the fact that readers often know next to nothing about them can best be described as 'violence of obscurity' (Love 2007:49).

The last woman I must write about has a name: Bongi, the woman in the eponymous poem which was published in *The Bavino Sermons* (1999 [2019]). 'Bongi' tells the story of her and her lover in exile and their return to South Africa. And although the story is narrated to the lyrical 'I' by Bongi's unnamed lover, it is of Bongi's hardships during the armed struggle in exile that the readers learn:

[...] when the bullets flew, when the bombs raged she gave birth in the bush, wrapped the child in an army shirt plucked from a dead guerilla, after washing it in the drinking water from her canteen. the second child she gave birth to in a refugee settlement makeshift hospital while her comrade kept guard (Rampolokeng 1999:83).

Bongi endures multiple traumas during her time as a soldier, but despite this, her fighting spirit seems unbroken:

a face as red as the waste between her legs
came into her view in her rifle's sights and she swabbed it. another
one tried to dive and her bullet helped it on its way (1999:83).

Bongi reminds me of a painting by Dumile Feni – called 'Untitled' – of a Black woman holding a rifle in one hand and carrying her baby in the other. The poem might be the lyrical interpretation of Feni's painting. However, while the painting does not speak about the woman's homecoming, the poem does. It is a homecoming shadowed by betrayal, death, and brokenness. Bongi's lover returns into the arms of his former lover, walks out on her and their two children. This betrayal does to Bongi what war could not do: it crushes her mental health. Or perhaps it heightens Bongi's traumatic experiences and brings them, belatedly, to the fore. Upon realising that things cannot be the same with his erstwhile lover, the father of Bongi's children returns home only to find that Bongi killed the girls and attempted suicide herself. The tragic scene is narrated in all its horrifying details, but without judgement for the lyrical I stresses that 'his leaving blew bongi's sanity to shreds. she didn't know his coming' (1999: 84). And yet, despite the loss of

her sanity, Bongi displays a shattering, tragic moment of undefeated despair – much like the girl in *Whiteheart* – when she is ‘hurling ‘inkatha’ in his face before she passed out’ (1999:84). The bitterly ironic juxtaposition of inkatha, a symbol of unity, and the irretrievably broken home of the protagonists is an unspeakable moment of loss and tragedy of such horrifying proportions that I cannot find the words to accurately speak to the poem. But Bongi speaks. That one word – *inkatha* – symbolises the hopes she might have had for her family to live in peace and unity after the traumatic years of war. Simultaneously, it speaks of unbearable, bitter, angry disappointment caused by her lover’s betrayal. It also gestures to a historical trauma, namely the violence between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal in the 80s and 90s. Thus, both in the personal realm (for Bongi) and in the political realm (in South Africa), Inkatha, the symbol of unity, has been inverted, hollowed out, as it were.

Like the girl in *Whiteheart*, Bongi is taken to a psychiatric institution. This raises a final question which I must ask myself: why are these two women who have haunted me throughout reading Rampolokeng’s work cast away into a psychiatric institution? Perhaps it is because society fears precisely this undefeated despair which both women have in their spirits despite being physically and mentally broken by the world, by men. I am not sure whether this is the answer, or whether I will find answers to my question. However, I know that I will continue to grapple with it beyond these pages, that I must continue speaking about the women, these two and Vincent’s mother in ‘Lines for Vincent’, and other women in *Blackheart*, and Mmaphefo in *Bird-Monk Seding*. And, of course, when I think of the women I must also ask myself about different representations of masculinity in Rampolokeng’s work. However, for now, this fragment on women is an invitation for other readers and critics to embark with me on this journey.

References

- Burger, J. 2006. Undefeated Despair. *Institute of Race Relations* 48,1: 23 - 48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396806066645>
- Busuku 2020. The Impaled Night Sky. *BKO Magazine* 4,3: 58 - 62.
- Caruth, C. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.20656>

- Chimurenga Chronic 2014. Poets are Hurting: Lesego Rampolokeng in Conversation with Mafika Gwala. 8 September. Available at: <https://chimurengachronic.co.za/poets-are-hurting/> (Accessed on 20 May 2022.)
- Crimp, D. 1998. Mourning and Militancy. *October* 51: 3 - 18.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/778889>
- Demir, D.D. 2022. Fragmentation, Space-Time Collapse and Melancholia: Reflections on Lesego Rampolokeng's *Bird-Monk Seding*. *Research in African Literature* 53,1, Spring: 106 – 118.
- Demir, D.D. 2020. Memory, History, and Mourning: Reading Lesego Rampolokeng and the Kalahari Surfers' *Bantu Rejex*. *BKO Magazine* 4,3: 46 - 50.
- Hartman, S. 2008. Venus in Two Acts. *Small Axe* 26 12,2: 1 - 14.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>
- Kgositsile, K. 2018. *Home Soil in my Blood*. Johannesburg: Xara Books.
- Krog, A. et al. 2009. *There was this Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Love, H.K. 2007. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Moreillon, O. 2020. Ranting out of Love: Some Notes on Lesego Rampolokeng's *blue v's*. *BKO* 3,4: 22 - 30.
- Munoz, J.E. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Rampolokeng, L. 1990. *Horns for Hondo*. Johannesburg: COSAW.
- Rampolokeng, L. 1998. *blue v's*. With German translations by Thomas Brückner. Stuttgart: Edition Solitude.
- Rampolokeng, L. 1999. *The Bavino Sermons*. Durban: Gecko Press.
- Rampolokeng, L. 2004. *Blackheart: Epilogue to Insanity*. Johannesburg: Pine Slopes Publications.
- Rampolokeng, L. 2005. *White Heart: Prologue to Hysteria*. Grahamstown: Deep South. <https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.100.0276>
- Rampolokeng, L. 2009. *Bantu Ghost*. Johannesburg: Mehlo-maya.
- Rampolokeng, L. *A Half Century Thing*. Grahamstown: Black Ghost Press.
- Rampolokeng, L. 2017. *Bird-Monk Seding*. Grahamstown: Deep South.
- Rampolokeng, L. 2022. *Writewords*. Kindle.
- Rebellato, D. 1998. In Conversation with Sarah Kane. 3 November, Studio

Danyela Dimakatso Demir

Theatre, Royal Holloway University of London. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAYfvqN5RV0>. (Accessed on 20 May 2022.)

Rodwell, B. 2014. *Word Down the Line*. Johannesburg: Mehlo-maya.

Visser, I. 2011. Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Studies. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47,2: 270 - 282.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2011.569378>

Wa Bofelo, M. 2020. Post-Freedom Dreams and Nightmares: A Review of Lesego Rampolokeng's *Bantu Ghost*. *BKO Magazine* 4,3: 31 - 36.

Dr. Danyela Dimakatso Demir
Postdoctoral fellow
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban
DemirD@ukzn.ac.za