

## **When meaning-making turns to poetry: a cross-cultural journey with young people in a context of poverty**

**Presented by: Thérèse Hulme Thelton Masimila, Thelren Masimila, Esmé Kock, Zulrich Isaacs, Michael Khoosal, Juclite Joseph and mr Robert Matthee. Facilitator: Dr Dirk Kotzé**

### **Notes on the format of the presentation:**

This presentation at the Narrative Conference held in Bellville on 13 October, took the form of a sharing of a research story coupled with the launch of a volume of poetry and a drama, entitled **piemp**, by young people from the "coloured!" community of Scottsville in the Western Cape.

During the presentation I (Thérèse) first introduced myself and gave a short overview of my journey as a white woman from a privileged background, to Petunia primary school in Scottsville. and how the creative writing project developed. Mr Matthee, in whose classes I first shared my love of poetry with young people from the community, joined us in our presentation. He played the guitar during the reading of one of the poems.

Each of the young poets then introduced him/herself and read his/her own Afrikaans poetry to the audience. After the reading, dr Dirk Kotzé asked the young people how they experienced their relationship with me as their mentor. The young people shared with the audience their experiences of mutuality, care and safety and described how it was connected to, amongst other things, them finding their own language with which to describe reality.

After their participation, the attention shifted to the members of the audience who reflected on what they had witnessed during our presentation. The conference itself therefore provided a context in which these young people could be witnessed as poets.

Although the talk did not take the form of a paper, I did include two quotes on the handout that was given to members of the audience. To me these quotes speak of the link between narrative and poetry – a link that was made visible to me by Gene Combs in 2000 when he told me: "Poetry lies at the heart of this (narrative) work" :

---

<sup>1</sup> The word 'coloured' is used in this document to refer to a specific South African community with a specific social location and history which is 'not white' and 'not black'. Because this is a 'description that was not chosen by a group of people, but forced upon them' (Foster 2009), I would have preferred to use the term 'so-called' in front of the word 'coloured'. However, for the sake of readability of this document, I eventually opted to place the word in inverted commas to reflect the historical subjugation that this term speaks of.

**“... every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome.**

( Adrienne Rich 2003: 85).

**“I believe that through the metaphor of poetics it becomes possible for us to challenge the marginalising of existence, and to play some part in making visible and in honouring “little sacraments of daily existence”....**

**The word *sacrament* invokes mystery. And it evokes a sense of the sacred significance of little events of people’s lives; those little events that lie in the shadows of the dominant plots of people’s lives, those little events that are so often neglected, but that might come to be regarded with reverence, and at times with awe...”** (Michael White 2000: 146, 145).

In the next section I will make visible the relevance of these quotes in terms of the discoveries the young people and I have made. These discoveries have been documented in my doctoral thesis (Hulme 2009) about pastoral care and the challenges of poverty. I will also briefly reflect on how the overcoming of silence by young people resulted in ***piemp***.

## **Background**

In 2005, I set out as a researcher in the “coloured” community of Scottsville, in Kraaifontein, one of Cape Town’s poor northern suburbs. My initial plans to offer lay counselling training to teachers in this community, were not met with enthusiasm. Instead, I started having regular conversations with young people about the problems they were experiencing. Through these conversations I discovered how the presence of drugs, alcohol, overcrowding, unemployment and violence, have turned ‘coloured’ suburbs such as Scottsville into the most dangerous places to live for young people in South Africa.

In addition, I started realising how in Scottsville there are very few recreational facilities whatsoever for its young people –no library, open community centre

or sports fields. Schools in poor communities are also under-resourced. The principal at Petunia Primary, Mr Foster (2006), told me that at the time when the school was built in 1982, most 'coloured' primary schools in the Cape did not 'receive' school halls, unlike white schools, even in poor areas. The conceptual system that denied this 'coloured' community a school hall by implication also denied young people a stage, and with it the opportunity to participate in the performing arts.

Thus a variety of historical and of current social conditions contributed to the discursive formation of powerlessness, shame and of silence and boredom amongst Petunia Primary's young people.

In March 2005, ten of my own poems were published in an anthology of Afrikaans poetry entitled *Nuwe Stemme 3* (Krog & Schaffer 2005). I had just attended a workshop by Krog and Schaffer in which the key elements of poetry were discussed and related to our own poetry. During one of an informal conversation with mr Matthee, a grade 7 Afrikaans teacher at Petunia, I offered to share what I had just learnt about poetry with his Grade 7 classes. Mr Matthee indicated to me that such a sharing would help him in his work as an Afrikaans teacher.

My creative work with young people in Scottsville thus began as a project in curiosity: an exploration of the non-known. I did not know how the poetry or I would be received amongst the teenagers. The first time I went into the Grade 7 classes, I took along poems with a pronounced rhythm. Musicality is intrinsic to poetry. I therefore took my drum along. As I read Ingrid Jonker's 'Donkerman', one of the young people kept the beat on the drum. Bringing a drum into the classroom made the musicality of poetry audible. The delighted response of the young people served as an encouragement to me. The next week I took a CD player to the school and played the two classes Breyten Breytenbach reading (on his CD, *Mondmusiek*) in his lovely rich Boland accent: 'Ek sal sterf en na my vader gaan Wellington toe met lang bene in die lig na waar die kamers swaar en donker is' ('I shall die and go to my father and go to Wellington with long legs, in the light to where the rooms are heavy and dark', translation mine). In this poem, the 'I' narrator speaks of

death as a journey to Wellington, to 'the house of my father'. There is a familiarity about this house, which is a boarding house with its many rooms, and its unusual mix of angels and board games. The poem also speaks of the fleeting quality of life: 'Ons kom en ons gaan is soos water uit die kraan.' ('Our coming and going is like water from the tap', translation mine).

*In the Grade 7B class, there was an almost devotional atmosphere. The normally boisterous teenagers were listening in complete silence. Some teenagers were wiping tears from their cheeks. In the Grade 7A class, a boy spontaneously applauded Breyten after the reading. The young people told me that they thought that the poem was 'beautiful'.*

(Excerpt from the research journal, 12 October 2005)

Breytenbach's poem invited an engagement with metaphor and mystery. In a context of poverty with its brutal realities, that morning, poetry opened a door to the *aporia* of mystery.

During the break, later, a thirteen year-old boy, B, came to my consultation room. I documented the events of that day in my research journal (12 October) as follows:

*B: This is the most beautiful poem I have ever heard...*

*T: What about it was beautiful to you?*

*B: I could hear it was coming from his heart.*

*T: This is what poetry is all about...*

*B: I was shocked. I have never heard anything like it before. Can you play it again, Miss?*

*('Ek was geskok. Ek het nog nooit so iets gehoor nie. Kan Juffrou dit nie weer speel nie?)*

*Then B and I listened together with heads bowed over the CD player.*

*B: That bit...that bit. (Indicates with his finger) ... that is really beautiful: vriende medesterwendes, moenie huiwer nie....*

*('Daai stukkie, daai stukkie (wys met vinger) ...dis baie mooi: vriende, medesterwendes, moenie huiwer nie....')*

In schools, young people's relationship with poetry and poetic language is often set up to be a primarily intellectual relationship in which poems are analysed and dissected to discover 'what they mean'. Poems are rarely experienced. That was the purpose of my engagement with the young people of Petunia Primary: to introduce them to the possibility that language can be experienced and that such experiences can make us all feel connected to something beyond ourselves.

***'Can I choose anything?' John discovers the possibility of languaging his own experience***

At the second of my poetry sessions with a Grade 7 class at Petunia Primary, I invited the teenagers to write poems about their experience of a significant person in their lives. During break the next week, I saw a young boy, John Pamplin, hovering outside the classroom where I worked as a narrative therapist. So I too 'hung out' in the corridor outside the classroom. After a while John took a small piece of paper from his shirt pocket: 'I have written something, but I don't know if it's right,' he said. I invited him in. The poem he had written was about his 'mother's love'. Ideas about what is 'right' poetry and the format in which to express this led to the poem being full of lofty words of love and appreciation that seemed to me far removed from a twelve year-old boy's experience of love. I decided to have conversation with John and asked him if it was OK for me to take notes as he spoke. He agreed. This is an excerpt of our conversation as recorded in my research journal on 18 October 2005.

*T: Waaroor gaan die gedig?*

*J: Oor my ma.*

*T: Wat wil jy sê oor jou ma?*

T: What is this poem about?

J: About my mother.

T: What do you want to say about your mother?

J: <i>Oor haar liefde.</i>	J: About her love.
T: <i>Vertel my van hierdie liefde. Hoe is dit vir jou?</i>	T: Tell me about this love. What's it like to you?

What followed was allowing John to go to his own experience rather than using words to describe some universal experience of love. Whilst John was speaking, I asked permission to record his exact words:

J: <i>Dis nie suur nie.</i>	J: It's not sour.
T: <i>Nou, John, as jou ma se liefde nie suur is nie, wat is dit dan?</i>	T: Tell me, John, if it's not sour, what is it then...?
J: <i>Soet, Juffrou.</i>	J: Sweet, Miss.
T: <i>Soet soos wat?</i>	T: Sweet like what?
J: <i>Kan ek enigiets kies Juffrou?</i>	J: Can I choose anything?
T: <i>Enigiets, John.</i>	T: Anything, John.
J: <i>Appels, perskes, lemoene en guavas.</i>	J: Apples, peaches, oranges and guavas.
T: <i>John, is jou ma se liefde net 'n vrugte-soet of is dit ook 'n ander soort soet?</i>	T: John, is you mother's love only fruity-sweet or is it also another kind of sweet?
J: <i>(glimlag) Wilsons toffies.</i>	J: (smiles) Wilsons toffees.

From my transcripts of our conversation I started to construct a provisional poem in John's presence:

<i>My ma se liefde is soos Wilsons toffies. Soet soos guavas...</i>	My mother's love is like Wilsons toffees. Sweet like guavas...
T: <i>Wat se soort guavas, John?</i>	T: What kind of guavas, John?
J: <i>Hoe bedoel juffrou nou?</i>	J: What do you mean, Miss?

<i>T: Hoe lyk en proe die guavas, is hulle hard, geel, groen of wat?</i>	T: What do these guavas look and taste like? Are they hard, green, yellow or what?
<i>J: Nee, Juffrou, daai sagte geles.</i>	J: No, Miss, those soft yellow ones.
<i>T (lees John se gedig vir hom): My ma se liefde is soos Wilsons toffies. Soet soos guavas sag en geel.</i>	T (reading John's poem back to him): My mother's love is like Wilsons toffees. Sweet like guavas soft and yellow.

John's poem became the first to be written as part of my creative work in the community. That morning in the unfolding process of coming to a poem, I was struck by John's question about poetic language: 'Can I choose anything?' I realised that, Scottsville's young people, like many others in South Africa, faced a particular challenge:

...the greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search for ways of thinking, ways of perception that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression.... The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterized apartheid society. For writers this means freeing the creative process itself from those very laws. It means extending the writer's perceptions of what can be written about, and the means and methods of writing.

(Ndebele 1991:67)

By being able to tell John that he could choose 'any' word, by centralising his experience of his mother, by being a 'questioning scribe' to him and in reading the words he chose back to him in the form of a poem, I believe I helped that day 'to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression'.

It was John's poem itself, "the spiritualities of the surface" of toffees and soft yellow guavas, that led me to experiment further with creative writing with young people in the community. The writer's group was formed in 2006. Between 2006 and 2008 a play about the dangers of tik, called "Die Groot Gevaar" was written by the young people and performed several times. Since 2008, the writers again turned their attention to the writing of poetry.

## **'Knowing your place' in Scottsville**

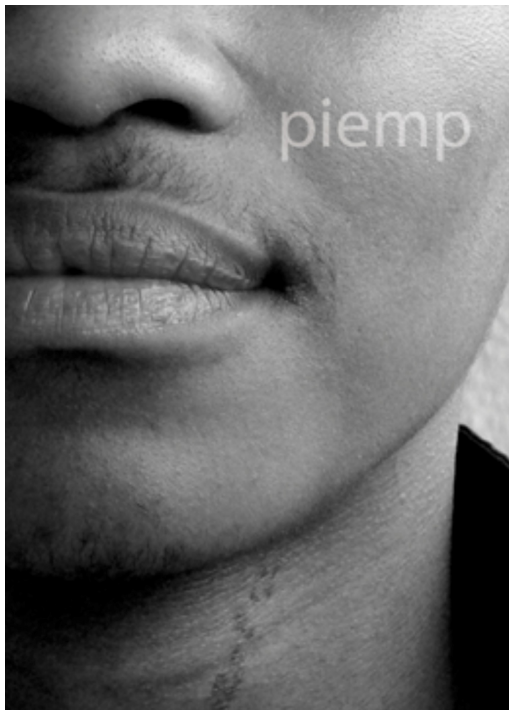
Historian Hermann Giliomee (2007:18-19) describes the rationale that prevailed between 1665 and 1795 in the district of Stellenbosch regarding the relationship between masters, slaves and the pastorate. The Synod of Dordrecht (of 1618/19) decreed that whoever was baptised should have the same right to freedom as other Christians. Hence, very few masters had their slaves baptised, because baptised slaves, by law, could not be sold. But Giliomee (2007:19) offers another reason why masters did not baptise their slaves: they feared that a baptised slave would regard himself the equal of his master and that it would then be very difficult to control him. The slave would not, so it was said, 'know his place'.<sup>2</sup>

To this day, the discourse of 'knowing your place' functions outside the church to subordinate the descendants of slaves, namely the 'coloured' community. In the 'coloured' community, the historical legacy of disregard combined with the current social hierarchies of control, have serious consequences for the community's young people. If your experience is one in which your own voice constantly has to be suppressed before the voice of the more powerful, you internalise the message that what you have to say cannot be valuable. Thus young people in the "coloured" community start losing faith in the legitimacy of their own knowledges and in their own ability to speak.

It is against this social backdrop that I have been listening to young people since 2006 with a sense of genuine appreciation to what they were willing to share with me.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Hulle het naamlik gevrees dat 'n gedoopte slaaf hom as die gelyke van die burgers sou beskou en dat dit dan baie moeilik sou wees om hom te beheer. Die slaaf sou nie, soos dit gestel is, "sy plek" ken nie.'



### **piemp**

The title of the young people's publication is slang Afrikaans that refers to "spilling the beans" or "telling/revealing the truth." I've heard the word being used for the first time amongst the young people in the Scottsville community. It is, because of the implication that secrets are shared, a verb that is normally associated with shame. Through their own poetry, the young poets of Scottsville each overcame various barriers of silence and shame: from speaking about verbal and physical abuse inside the home ("Begonia" by Esmé Kock, "Hy kyk en kyk na die wie staar" by Thelton Masimila) to the community's apathy to a brutal killing on the streets ("Gemeenskapsverlies" by Verona de Villiers) and the destruction that the drug "tik" causes ("Die Groot Gevaar"). **piemp** therefore is not only in itself a deconstruction, an overcoming of the discourses of silence and shame in this community, it is also testimony to the richness of young people's language and imagination. I also started experiencing the awe the Michael White wrote about as the young people brought poetry about sacred "little events" such as laying under a tree ("Die wonder van 'n boom" by Michael Khoosal) or the touch of a grandfather's arm ("In my gedagtes het ek gewonder..." by Zulrich Isaacs).



Michael Khoosal and Thérèse

A glossary of new Afrikaans words and descriptions (with explanations given by the young people themselves) at the back of the book also makes visible how these young people's use of language shaped the Afrikaans language itself.

Ronelda S Kamfer writes as follows on the back cover of **piemp** about "coloured" young people's relationship with language: " When one lives in a community in which violence, gangs and drugs are part of daily life, the good things are so precious that one will always treasure it. For young people the most difficult things are not the violence, the gangs or the helplessness – the most difficult are the words. The words to say what is wrong, the words to describe the pain, the words to ask questions with. The most difficult of all is the lack of words... Poetry was for too long out of the reach of ordinary people – **piemp** brings it back home; **piemp** says silence is no answer."

Thérèse Hulme

[hulme@medinet.co.za](mailto:hulme@medinet.co.za)

## References:

Breytenbach, B 2001. Ek sal sterf en na my vader gaan. (Track 5) *Mondmusiek* CD, Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau.

Foster, R 2005, 10 May. Conversation with author. Petunia Primary, Scottsville.

Foster, R 2006, 15 February. Conversation with author. Petunia Primary, Scottsville.

Giliomee, H 2007. "Nog altyd hier gewees". *Die storie van 'n Stellenbosse gemeenskap*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg.

Hulme, T 2009. *Pastoral care and the challenge of poverty: when opening hearts and minds create possibilities in a marginalised school community*. DTh thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria.

Krog, A & Schaffer, A 2005. *Nuwe Stemme 3*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg.

Ndebele, N S 1991. *Rediscovery of the ordinary. Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. Johannesburg: COSAW.

Rich, A 2003. *What is found there. Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. London: Norton.

White, M 2000. *Reflections on Narrative practice: Essays and interviews*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre.