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Khulile Nxumalo
interviewed by Alan Finlay

Khulile Nxumalo's poems have been published in various journals and anthologies in South Africa and abroad. In 2004 his first book of poems, ten flapping elbows, mama, was published by Deep South. He lives in Johannesburg with his partner and two children, working as a television writer, researcher and director.

Of his childhood, he wrote recently on Litnet.co.za:

> I grew up in Diepkloof, Zone 2. In spite of the menacing steel grimness of the Hippos from the apartheid military, and in spite of the smell of teargas and wounds left behind by rubber bullets, quite a few other things went down... You may find this hard to believe, but almost all the boys I grew up with in our street are dead... We were the first generation from Soweto to come to the city just to hang around. When the Group Areas Act was lifted Ster Kinekor cinemas were open to all and the Carlton Centre became the centre of the world. I joined, or actually not really joined, but went along with, a gang called The VKs... There were the superstars of the scene, like my friend Pat, who was a hit because he looked like George Michael of Wham! We all had permed hair... There was a lot of sex going around. I guess the most f u n had to be had because the girls, who came from Sacred Heart, Woodmead, St Barnabas, were only out for the weekend and would have to go back to school... America influenced this generation because we started to breakdance, BMX bikes were a fashion for those who could afford them, and I had a poster of Janet Jackson on my walls and she was in my dreams. A lot has happened since then...

AF: Tell me a little bit more about your childhood?

KN: Well I was born in Diepkloof, Soweto, as you know, in 1971. My mother was Ndebele and my father was Venda. Her name was Pauline Mahlangu and my father's surname was Radzelane. It is me and my sister Maureen.

AF: How did you become Nxumalo?

KN: When my mother married my stepfather, Fanzana Nxumalo, we were considered part of the package. My grandmother tells me that when my mother was pregnant with me, she kicked her out of the house. After I was born, my father arranged that we go and stay with my grandmother for a year in Venda. I spent my first year with her. I finally went to see her after 30 years. I am told that before he died, my mother's father, Lot Mahlangu, got admitted to Sterkfontien hospital after he took to burning the books that he kept in his library. He was a self-taught man, who worked as a driver for a Jewish family at the time.

AF: And your stepfather?

KN: His father was a Sophiatown *kleva* and played in band called Kings of Harmony Boys. He tried to teach me how to play the piano. All I know are the chords for Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica's outro. My stepfather's father came from Vryheid and ended up in Orlando. Apparently he loved women, and in his Kofifi days was dating most of the beauty queens in Sophiatown. Bra Ndoza, my stepfather was a boxing fanatic who loved his Old Buck gin that gave him kidney problems. After he died, I inherited his smooth Brentwoods and the Barker shoes. But there was a tug that went on with the mother of his biological son. My mom decided to return us to Diepkloof.

AF: When did you first become interested in poetry?

KN: In high school. We were taught the Petrarchan sonnet, John Donne and all the likes. I started playing around with rhyming couplets, but I don't think there was any content as such. That is why I understand when someone says there's a difference between writing and typing. Rustum [Kozain] has a poem about `the word processed word'. Getting the opportunity to study outside the country, at Waterford in Swaziland, led

to exposure to African Literature in general. Basically having access to the whole Heinemann African Writers Series. I was drawn to Serote's long poem format. I discovered that poetry could be liberated - it's essence is not in the terseness of verse. I also read Ayi Kwe Armah, Soyinka, and tried my best to understand Okigbo. My stepfather also had a love for the clan praises of the Nxumalo surname, that opened up how I would receive the thumping beat in Mazisi Kunene's work.

AF: I found some of your poems in *ten flapping elbows, mama* **complex. When I read them aloud, their meaning became a lot more apparent....**

KN: That's interesting, because I generally do not imagine myself a performer poet. I tend to want to write poetry on the page. In a sense I would say when I started working on crafting the poem, it was to look at images, so you work on that when you write. It wasn't so much on the spoken word. So generally I would say that my concerns in poems are on how the images work. Usually it's the images that come. Like 'Shafari', which is based on a safari, but a highway safari, an urban safari, me and my friend, driving around town, and it all goes crazy.

AF: What do you mean by psycho-narration?

KN: It's mainly a way in which you can think about language. I wanted a freedom to demolish that wall of what's reality out there and what's inside my head. I wanted to find a language that narrates as if there isn't any distinction. So it's like I'm narrating myself as a psychology, without any limiting sense that this tree is far away, or this tree is objective. I found that if you let go with the long poem format, and let things go anywhere, there's more freedom. It's not so much free association, but strange things can happen.

AF: How is it different from free association?

KN: I think for me it's more about being less certain of the `I' persona speaking. You don't really have a protagonist as such. The protagonist can be the one that's being watched, now, or being spoken too. The voices change all the time. It is an anti-lyrical form, in the same way that in jazz, deviation into improvisation creates a new order of musical scales, tonality and sense of meaning.

AF: And with that trying to bend or break language, to make it work for the poem...

KN: Yes. I've always been aware that it sounds like there is something specific in how we write English poetry in South Africa or how the generations of poets wrote poetry, the 70s and so on. So I look at that heritage as stuff I can either improve on or update. It's quite hard to believe there was a time in my life when I didn't really speak in English, which means that my world was expressed and imagined and consumed and recreated in another language. So I find that sometimes English doesn't say the things that other languages I know do, or in the way that they do - whether Tsotsitaal, Sotho, isiZulu etcetera.

AF: Can you give an example?

KN: An expression like 'cream-white' – some people say it's bastard English, but it's a particular colour. There's an ice cream look about it. There were clothes we used to wear called cream-white. I think in proper English it would be `off-white' or something like that. But the image cream-white is important. In Zulu it can be hard to find one word for something that is made up of three words. Zulu doesn't itemize sometimes, like English, but it expresses. The object can be given a name as in a phrase, not as an item, but as a whole sentence of meaning. I sometimes use this in my poetry.

AF: If you're writing free poetry, that's what happens. It's less a case of naming something directly, as opposed to working around it, a process of beginning to articulate it...

KN: Yes. For instance in the beginning of `Into the whistle's nostrils', "joy has no generation gaps/ nor silences in between/ like broken denture"....

AF: When did you learn English?

KN: We'd started English by Standard 1, learning how to spell, reading Benny and Betty books, "We go to town. We go to...". I would say I could speak English by Standard 7 and I was fluent by the time I finished Matric.

AF: You play around with grammar too...

KN: Ja, that's more like a writing device. That I take up from Kamu Brathwaite's work, and I guess Seitlhamo's [Motsapi] work. I'm trying to be unsettling, sabotaging, undercutting it, forcing it to speak more than what the Queen wants it to do. I guess it could be an instigation, a terrorism. The truth of the matter is the empire of English has brought a lot of richness to language, yet there are many Englishes that are spoken in the world. So there shouldn't be any fear that we should not have to speak the Englishes that we know.

AF: What do you make of the spoken word movement? Is it a movement?

KN: There seems to be a movement that comes to life as an extension of black American slam poetry, or the stuff that we saw in films like *Love Jones* or *SLAM.* But one gets a sense that it is not interested in being in conversation with its own precedents, or specifically the idea of poetry on the microphone in this country. Because we've had that in the 70s and in the great era of poetry in the mass rally, and poetry as a curtain-raiser to the political speech. Mzwakhe was the height of that. It's a cultural form. So in that sense I'm not too anti it. If I were a performance poet I would be looking for ways that link more to that form, and how it was developed, as opposed to a black American twang.

AF: Sometimes it seems to be inwards looking, inspired by itself, creating a cliché. It's even in the adverts...

KN: At some points it tends to sound the same. But it seems to be an important poetry vehicle for young people today, so I don't know. Generations do different things, I guess. The stuff that Lebo Mashile does, I think it's quite good. It's a rhythmic and evocative orality, which stresses interesting images. I am always on the lookout for tone that can influence how I write love poetry. But spoken word poets are sometimes too certain for me. For me writing always contains that anxiety about what it is, where we live, what we're doing, what we're about.

AF: What do you take as your tradition?

KN: You can't be a poet writing in English and not know that there's been writing in English in the country for a long time, wherever it comes from. There is a big history of black poets writing in English. Even at the turn of the past century, there were English poets that were black, who were missionaries. They have interesting expressions of language and experience, trying to express their world. My interest is in how that has happened, in what style and form, and I pick up on things like that. I really do think there is a need to get books on the shelf, as much as they used to in the past. Sepamla, Mafika Gwala, Mzwakhe, they put books on the shelf - it's an important cultural thing. For me to choose a place on the shelf with them, is an historical choice. I think shelf life is longer than microphone life. But I read poetry written in English in this country avidly, Cronin, Sole, Berold, Press and so on.

AF: How does *Chimurenga* fit into all of this?

KN: I see *Chimurenga* in terms of cross-continental journals like *Transitions,* done by Soyinka, and another that came out of Makere University, including *Black Orpheus.* At the time people like Mphahlele were teaching in Nigeria. There was a tie between intellectuals from Africa's diaspora. A space like that is important, a cross-continental thing where you and I as young people in South Africa can read about those guys in Nairobi - read poets from other parts of the continent. I have only heard the older generation poets: Soyinka, Okigbo and Lenrie Peters. I am only doing a closer reading of Cesaire now. But in terms of the new poems, we don't really get exposed to them. African intellectuals have either left their country, to get better work, or they're being repressed by their governments.

AF: Were you politically active when you were younger?

KN: Not in any serious way.

AF: A lot of the poems in your book were written in the 90s, during the transition. Like many other poets, you seem uncertain about the future...

KN: When I start writing poetry - almost just after the generation of the Dikenis and so on - the political developments started showing distasteful things as well. 'Xstacy' I wrote on the day we were voting: "It rained glass and *cadbury eclairs* that year. / We on the roof could not stop singing / bleeding still / from the glass grains stuck / between the toes." It's that type of expectation and disillusionment which I get, and we'll continue to see more and more. It's happening in the sense now in terms of what we see of social processes and things like that. I believe in the sense that people are getting poorer, so it's becoming quite tragic.

AF: What can the poet do about this?

KN: I wouldn't know. Kelwyn Sole says that the best thing a person can do is to take up a political cause, find something to do in this time of soap operas. The poets can be the instigators. But I think a poet usually writes about what you see, so a poet is the witness of their time. I'm working on a poem called `The Melville Plenoptic', which is about these four guys who walk up and down 7"' street, calling themselves the Revolutionary Apparatus, with the vision and mission to change 7`" Street - I don't know into what, but they all failed.

AF: Publishing has opened up opportunities for poets in South Africa, for new voices to come through. Deep South is a case in point. But at the same time, your book of poems, it seems quite marginalized...

KN: I think there's a new mainstream. I don't think I'm part of that. It is the performance poets, partly because they are popular. When

they're billed at a festival people come. If you billed me I don't think that people would come! No-one knows my poetry except those who read *New Coin.* I don't know how popular Lesego [Rampolokeng] is anymore. I understand people like Kgafela oa Magogodi are very popular now. And from the billing of the last Poetry Africa, there is a new group of young people who are crowd-pullers. I was speaking the other day of the reading that we had in Grahamstown [in 1995], with Seitlhamo, Karen [Press], Kelwyn, the others. It was quite nice and diverse. We were still very young. I think it was one of the strongest get togethers of poets. But it feels like nothing's developed out of that. On the other hand, you've got the *Sunday World*'s poetry pages.

AF: Who is Festina?

KN: It's a person I created. It's a composite of people I've been in love with.

AF: I find your love poems interesting. There are moments of intense sensitivity, a gentleness, and then the rougher parts, harder images. I think they work very well.

KN: The difficulty with love poetry is to keep the conversation with your love object in the poem open to the reader. Since my mother died I've had a problem of fearing loss too much. So that affects my love poetry, and my love, even in real life. And learning what Seitlhamo calls the `awkward languages of love'. It's part of my writing process. Someone said we artists make drama out of things that are not dramatic. What else would we do?

AF: How did your mother die?

KN: She died of pneumonia. She was living with the HIV virus. We gathered that she contracted the virus from a blood transfusion at Baragwanath Hospital, four years before her death. We struggled to get the money from the insurance company to bury her. Even with the help of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies at Wits, we ended abandoning the fight as it was beginning to delay burial plans. Somehow, later, in her life policy, which she took out in the early 1970's, she was sent an AIDS exclusion clause.

AF: I'm interested in your idea of uncertainty, and how it influences your approach to poetry. It's different, for instance, to poetry where the conclusions of the poet are already formed at the start of the poem. The "I" remains closed to the poem as a process of articulation...

KN: Who can be certain? I don't know about certainty. What it does, certainty, sometimes it defaces memory. It quietens memory, it muffles it. That's how you can become certain. When you're haunted by memories of the past all the time... when they don't affect how you're feeling or when you're able to deny them, that's when you become certain.

AF: And we're told to participate in a sense of certainty in South Africa. Maybe it's necessary. Still...

KN: I find that difficult. For me it's difficult. South Africa's past is too hard. I think for me certainty would be someone who would come back from the other side of death to see what life is all about.