Reading the World, Teaching and Learning the Word

by Natalia Molebatsi

Poetry is our every link in the chain of humane attempts.

This essay is anchored by the reminder that poetry is connected to everyday life, to everyday *things*. Furthermore, this essay is lodged in the idea that poetry tells emotive and imaginative stories that reflect the human experience – whether one is writing about women, family, music, land, war, or the daring idea of a future.

I will begin by briefly sharing my teaching philosophy and my opinions about the intersections of teaching and learning. Investing in the power of memory is one tool I value in my navigation of the world. Students and teachers can remind one another about the value of what they remember personally, but also the memories of a people, be it family, community or even this flawed notion of the nation state, in order to unravel questions that might generate interest about the world we live in. In this writing I also share my opinion about the power that 'reading' has when creating and teaching poetry. I suggest that teachers emphasise reading before they encourage students to create poetry. Whether spoken, sung or written, a poem's rich texture is indicated by how much 'reading' was done. Teaching and learning poetry introduce us to a spectrum of poetic (and artistic) voices that challenge us to attend to the pleasures and complexities of ideas, content, form, style, prosody, and imagery, among others.

On a personal philosophy of teaching and learning

Why do we teach? Why do we yearn to learn? How does learning and teaching overlap or intersect? These are recurring questions for me.

When I was a child, my maternal grandmother would regularly send me to pick a type of herb that grew around the edges of our house. She made medicine from a mixture of herbs to heal different ailments in infants. Some days she came with me and stood by as I picked these herbs, on some days, I watched her, and other times, we would both do the picking. On days that she picked the herbs, I would carefully follow her gentle fingers, and she did the same with me. I had no idea that I was learning a significant skill, or that I was participating in an ancient practice that my grandmother was passing on to me. She was a medicine woman who had also received the gift and knowledge of healing from her people before her. She was many other things too, and I realise as an adult, that her way of 'teaching' me, was to open the door to her wisdom.

In her wisdom, I would be immersed in what she knew, what she was allowing me to experience. In

this way, my understanding of learning and how I experienced my first teacher, left a transformative and lasting impression on my life's journey. Everything she did, the herbs, the songs she sang, the praise poetry, the praying, was repetitive and gentle. I suspect that we might not even be aware how much we need the knowledge that is presented to us at the time, until we have to make an intervention, armed with what we know. Today, I am able to identify these herbs (along with her praise poems and songs) and dig into my re-memory of how to pick these herbs, how to mix them, and how to heal with them, if the occasion presents itself.

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* bell hooks highlights that teaching and learning provide an opportunity to question the politics of class, the impact of patriarchy and sexism and the legacies of colonization. Reading this statement, I suddenly re-membered being in class at 13 years old. I had a biology teacher who would never teach biology. We were annoyed because we knew we would fail his class. He would tell us instead about his life as a student political activist, and often say with a smile "arm yourself with a knowledge they are not expecting" and "they are waiting to devour you." I never forget these words, although they made no sense at the time.

Mr Mailula was teaching us to transgress the laws of oppression meted by the apartheid government of South Africa. He was teaching us that there were other ways of knowing, although our education system was never designed for us to survive the legacies of apartheid, not to mention succeed in the capitalist world. He knew that the stories he was sharing with us, we would most likely never read in official history books, but believed that they were valuable and would anchor us.

There was also Mr Malibe, my English teacher, who gave me the first book I ever owned, *Chocolates for my Wife* by Todd Matshikiza, a book that had just been unbanned some 18 months before. In between his lessons, Mr Malibe would sneak in some of his experiences of being tortured by the police. With tears in his eyes and a lump in his throat, he told snippets of his and others' realities, as if to purge. Later in life, as I reminisced on these moments I had considered insignificant for years, I realised that these 'small' memories are what shaped how I walk in the world.

Our pursuit for learning and teaching are fashioned by different goals. For me, the overarching principle of learning is to wrestle with memories, concepts, phenomena, and texts, in a quest for knowledge as I navigate the world of relationships and new ways of seeing and doing. Some of us learn by observing the actions of others, while others learn through repetitive practices, like how my grandmother sent me for those herbs, over and over, until they were forever lodged in my memory. Although she never said much about them, I will always remember their value. I followed her hands, as she mixed and crushed, and how the same herbs brought many babies to good health.

In my view, there are many other anecdotes as the ones above, everyday people's examples to set teachers on their way to reflect with students on their thoughts, memories, writing and rewriting. I

often think about how teaching and learning overlap, whether they become partnership models, in the way bell hooks explains partnership as it "leads to transgression…, rethinking the source of expertise, upending traditional hierarchies—all of which is difficult and risky." I believe in teaching and learning spaces where hierarchies are broken down and more dynamic and vulnerable relationships are negotiated. Hierarchies breed fear and insecurities, and as a Black woman, they also remind me of the bondage of patriarchy and of White supremacy.

My poetry classes and workshops are student centric, and interactive. That, for me, means to walk into a class trusting the energy of my students. Many times, I don't know what makes teaching possible, and so, that is the difficulty I wrestle with as I surrender to the belief that I do not walk into creative spaces alone and that there is an intersection between spiritual and physical worlds. There is a deep ancestral well of gifts that I draw from, one I still fail to explain, but trust and honour.

I also plan classes according to a topic or theme in order to focus the lesson and invite students to interrupt the sessions should they have questions or comments. This approach, in my view, requires the teacher to surrender and trust the process/journey and not the destination.

In my own work I also attempt to unearth artistic and everyday practices of Black women in particular, whose work and worth continue to be erased by histories of inequality. Most of the teachings that have shaped my worldview are not written in textbooks but carried in people's voices and passed on orally from generation to generation – voices like my grandmother's at home, or Mr Mailula's and Mr Malibe's at school.

My classes are also text driven – books, songs, dance, social media etc. In addition to material that I bring with me to class, I ask if students have any texts they want to contribute to the session. Regardless of the type of text, students should be offered enough sources of information to navigate topics and build on their thinking, knowledge and writing. Teaching expansive poetic and other texts helps illustrate to students that whichever question or theme they are working with is being wrestled over in different ways in all parts of society or the world.

On 'reading' the world

By 'reading' I am not only referring to the conventional reading of books – that, would be too limiting. I am however, also referring to a reading of the world as a socio-political and meaning making machine, much like how Benjamin Noys attempts to explain in his article *Utopias of the Text: Pre-Figurations of the Post-Literary*. He states that "utopias of the text are the moments of the emergence of a new and radical concept of the text as overflowing all limits and boundaries." He traces these utopias in the writings of among others, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel

Foucault who often emerge at the margins, "in fragments or boundaries at which the utopia can be glimpsed before disappearing" (2019: 1).

I also believe that the body itself acts as an object of art. This statement is encouraged by Derrida's criticism of the assumption that only words represent the world. In this way when reading the world I am also influenced by Derrida's non-literary texts, which are everywhere, in everything – advertisements, brochures, and newspaper or magazine articles and editorials, among many others.

Some of this reading, found in the stories of one's family members for example (I often encourage students to think about their grandmothers in particular), can be used to stimulate one's creativity in the reading of one's heritage, towards a journey of self-identity or self-writing. Students can also engage in social and political reading, especially if they want to write about class, inequality or poverty. Visiting art or political history museums is another example of an exercise that students can undertake. Reading museum exhibitions and their performance of meaning making can provoke thoughts and ideas, and even if no thought is provoked, teachers should probe their students, why they were not touched or inspired.

I grew up without the possibility of access to a museum or a library due to the evils of apartheid. This lack of access saw many youth, artists, and intellectuals look to old wise women as libraries – hence the saying, when an old person dies, a library has burnt down. To this day, many freedom fighters and traditional healers are regarded as museums and archival cosmoses because of the kind of history and wisdom they possess in their bodies and in their homes. In addition to reading these human body-archives, we read the streets as living, breathing museums and libraries of reality, dreams, history, poverty, grief *and* joy. Students should of course be encouraged to turn the pages of many a book and read how other writers write (for vocabulary, global perspective, form and style among others). Sometimes words will decide to become a poem, and at other times they will morph into something else, or a poem may choose to die, and that too, is fine.

We live in our bodies. Our emotions, dreams, wishes, anger, and memories, live inside our bodies. Therefore, our very spirits are carried by this vessel called the body. The body listens to everything and keeps it safe for us – from birth, right through to our death. Our bodies are recording devices that should be accessed because they store and 'download' knowledge and memories. 'Reading the world' for me also includes mineral matter and substances like stones, rocks, soil, trees and water, among others. I often wonder for instance, how stones absorb memory to be keepers of stories. How does one write a poem about stones as keepers of memories? What questions does one ask a rock or a tree? These are some of the questions that I explore with students. In this way, students can be reminded to explore the life of all 'things' around us.

My own teaching of poetry is largely influenced by reading and experiencing the realities of women,

particularly Black women and girls – because I happen to be both. Here I focus on women I know and those I do not know, those I connect with personally, and those I hear or read about in books and imagine from both the past and the future. If I am teaching 50 students for example, and all of them can write at least one line about what they remember or imagine about their grandmother – from emotion to scent, from voice to lessons and food – then they have access to poetry from their own blood line and that is an example of a chain/group poem that they can use as a class exercise.

Poetry comes from life and thus is life

Poetry – or any art form – should be/is inseparable from the lives we live. As a teacher, have students ask these questions and understand that they can create poetry from *everything*. Ask your students to look outside (or inside) for what seems silenced, or what might be difficult to share. What brings you shame? What brings you embarrassment? What is it in your life, that seems insignificant, small and irrelevant? These are some of the questions that in my view have the potential for real introspection and an ability to help others confront their difficulties around trauma, shame, guilt, and embarrassment, among others.

Our stories also give us the opportunity to illuminate the lives of our people whose voices were snatched from them by the histories of inequality, not because we attempt to represent the world, but because we tell our own stories, honestly. I was raised by women who spent their lives working in the homes and fields of white supremacy, I inherited their disenfranchisement, their resilience, their rage, but also the joys they insisted upon in the midst of all their grief. I do not write for these women, but I write to remember them, to honour their personhood and how their lives are intertwined to mine. They hardly had time for themselves, and the stories they told us, the experiences we shared together in our homes were our way of bonding, of navigating the world.

Some of my poetry (learning and teaching) wrestles with how these women insisted on their agency and refused to be victims, most of them did not stand a chance against the capitalist whip. Most of them could not read or write, but they insisted on their children graduating in some of the best universities. How was this possible? I often wrestle with how I remember such things? I think memory is difficult, although I always take refuge in it.

On creativity with language

As someone whose first language is not English, and who had 'first world' languages stuffed down our throats, I believe poetry should not be confined to the English language or to any other dominant language. English especially, because of its history of annihilation of indigenous languages in many parts of the world. As teachers and students in a global community, I am convinced that we should encourage one another to explore other words in other languages. Some languages have more

words to mean the same thing, why is that? Some concepts do not exist in other languages, why? We should ask these questions with one another and acquire curiosity about language.

In the opening line of her poem "Dreaming in Gujarati" Shailja Patel says "The children in my dream speak in Gujarati." This line introduces the reader to language as identity and nostalgia, and to poems being offerings from our dreams. In the second stanza the poem reveals the poet as a child of immigrants in England. The poem is a struggle with racism and prejudice. The poet says "I am six/in a playground of white children/Darkie, sing us an Indian song." These lines are a demonstration of how the poet struggles with her race, language, and how she wants to run from herself because of how less of a human being whiteness makes her feel. The words "Twelve/I tunnel into books/forge an armor of English words" demonstrate how the poet as a child, lives in a world that teaches us that English is a shield through which we can win the war of erasure, yet our dreams undo the lie, as seen in the opening line. Reading and listening to this poem, resembles for me, how poetry is linked to memory, and how our memory provides us an opportunity to plough words that blossom our truths.

"Words impose themselves, take root in our memory against our will" says bell hooks about the lines from another poem, "The Burning of Paper instead of Children" by Adrienne Rich. Although the poem begins from an autobiographical point – with a neighbour calling her to report that her son has burnt a book, it speaks against domination and censorship, it speaks against racial, class and other persecution of all living beings. One line that moved and disturbed me just as much as it did hooks: "This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you." I liken this line to Patel's "I tunnel into books/ forge an armor of English words." As much as the English language is one of domination, one that haunts both these poets, it is my belief that English, or any language (of domination) can be tamed to live on our tongues.

In Rich's poem, the poet insists that language requires repairing in order for it to help us overcome suffering. I suspect Rich is referring to spoken/written language in general when she says "A language is a map of our failures." Once again, we are reminded that language pours over the limits of spoken or written texts. How does one tame a language? How does one repair language? These questions have been wrestled over by many African writers in English such as Wole Soyinka, Gcina Mhlophe and Wally Serote who infuse African flavouring, proverbs and textures to English hence the concept of Englishes. In this way, English is no longer only seen as the oppressor's language, but one that the oppressed can also own in order to recover our own experiences and speak, through its words, against domination.

In the sixth stanza of her poem, Patel speaks about her father and his wisdom – which is not considered as such in the western world:

he speaks Gujarati

solid ancestral pride.
five languages
five different worlds
yet English
shrinks
him
down
before white men
who think their flat cold spiky words
make the only reality.

Furthermore, the poet writes "Words that don't exist in English:

Najjar
Garba
Arati"

What do these words mean? These could be defined, discussed and played around with in class. Perhaps a language challenge would be for you as a teacher to create a poem from these Gujarati words or another language other than English. How does poetry and its role for indigenous people and families navigate a world that is racist, classist and homophobic? And how can we use poetry to express these issues in ways that contribute to changed behaviours and open up conversations about class, race, agency, humanity, etc?

When I teach poetry, I take my ancestors and their languages in tow. In Africa and in many indigenous communities, poetry has historically been about documenting and passing on family traditions and historical events and acts to the next generation. I often teach students that their language can live and be preserved through their poetry. In my language for example, we are also called by the names of our clans, and/or the names of our animals. I am both elephant and buffalo. The animals we are named after also relate to how our ancestors connected to and revered the environment around them. For example, if your totem or animal name is Batlhaping (the ones of the fish) then your ancestors are caretakers of the river or the ocean. If yours are Ba bina Tlou or Batloung (Elephant dancers), they are protectors of the savannah or matriarchs. These examples offer ancestral and language tools that students can use for their research, and offer an understanding that they can honour their ancestors through the poetry of their affinity, and through exploring language.

On research

Personally, I am also committed to how poetry and its performance can be an intervention of pan-

African queer feminism and pan-African thought. Thus, these themes, among others, show up in my own research, writing, and teaching. What is important to highlight however, is that these are my thoughts, notes, and prompts to students. They should not be used by teachers to limit students. Teachers should ask students what their own research interests and influences are and help guide them towards creating poems out of those. What are the intersecting and compelling questions that come out of a student's research on a specific topic or theme? Ensure that students are clear that your own personal styles or tastes are just examples and not what is expected from them. The expectation should be that they do research on their topic of interest, and express themselves honestly. Encourage and affirm your students' own personal tastes, freedom and autonomy. Highlight that before creative writing or reciting of poetry, creative thinking and research are important objectives of learning and teaching poetry. It is also important to highlight that writing itself is a process of rewriting and rewriting, reading, editing, and doing it over again.

What is your poem about? – this is also another recurring question for me – the answer to which may assist you with your research. I suggest that a maximum of three clear and intersecting themes flow in a poem in order to avoid clutter. If a number of topics emerge from a poem, they should also be traced or linked to the main theme or point of the poem. There should never be a doubt in regards to what the poet is attempting to communicate. Every word should be able to defend itself and earn its place in your poem, and researching your theme, can help.

Creativity is a gentle, reciprocal process

As much as teachers should have expectations upon their students, they should ensure that they understand the expectations of their students on them. In this way, the relationship is reciprocal in nature. Ensure that students feel safe and that they ask for what they need. If they need their creative products to remain confidential for example, that should be honoured, especially because writing often presents personal issues that compel people to lay their traumas bare. Writing poetry should be a healing and not a harmful process. I do not believe that teachers should expect students to compete with one another in finding their way to expressing themselves honestly. Poems also find their way to their writers. My own approach is that if there is a person to compete with, that person should be your own self. If you have a list of poems to share or analyse with students, attempt to present the words and imagery as relatable and as gentle to them as possible.

Poetry as a tool of activism, drama and theatre

Some of the aims of poetry classes could be to stimulate new ways of thinking about the performance of culture and activism. As a teacher, you might want to bring with you, poets who are close to your heart or the theme you are undertaking for that class. For me, it is poets such as South Africa's Koleka Putuma and Lebogang Mashile, African American Cheryl Clarke and Jamaican

Canadian D'bi Young Anitafrika. In addition to being poets, they are theatre practitioners, scholars, and activists who use poetry as praxis in their gender and cultural activism and stage productions. They also create poetry performances and theatre productions that are intertwined, thus blurring the boundaries between poetry and theatre as channels to highlight the lived experiences of feminist and queer women in spaces that are still riddled with homophobic, hetero-patriarchal and racist violence. Their work is contributing to a generational transformation of how poetry is created and consumed today.

These poets' work generates and responds in many ways to questions of how truth, rage, and joy among others, are represented in poems. Rooted in African spiritualities and epistemologies, my work and the work of these poets, also proposes an offering of self writing, anti-racist, and decolonial thought. In this way, I am setting a scene, a backdrop to my own teaching and writing practice, which I hope, will help teachers and their students take a moment to consider where they might want to approach their own questions of humanity from, and how this reflects in the meaning of the poetry they produce.

Some concluding remarks

I cannot emphasise enough how poetry is not a stand-alone process but one that intersects with so many other activities in our lives, hence, poetry *is* life itself. It might be useful to state the objectives of your class at the onset based on how much time and resources you have, and for your students to state the reasons for joining the class or session. Sharing your writing process and personal philosophy for writing and teaching, may also center students and provide them an opportunity to think of their own personal philosophies. More than anything, poetry is about sharing stories, especially those that have not been heard, those deemed lesser stories. I believe that through poetry, we can wrestle with and attempt to approach the difficult process of memory and that through poetry we can heal ourselves and the world around us.

Possible exercise for deconstructing texts

1. Choose a text (a poem, a song, a photograph, etc.) to question what its possible meaning might be;
2. Question the common meaning of your text
3. Expose any cultural, political or social biases that might exist in the text
4. Analyse sentence structure
5. Play with and agree with the possible or underlying meaning of the text

Some useful exercise for writing a chain poem

1. Choose a theme or topic
2. Prompt each student to give the first word that comes to mind about the topic

3. Give students some writing time on the word that came up and why? (a minimum of 5 to 10 minutes). If nothing comes up for them, they should also explain why.
4. Appoint a scribe
5. Student read out what they wrote (between a line and a verse of 4 or 8 lines, depending on available class time)
6. Go over the writing by wrestling with possible meaning and structure
7. Establish a flow and eliminate all repeating words/lines

These are just examples of some fun and challenging exercises that teachers can undertake with their students. These can be customised to each situation or context.

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Sources

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