Zulu Love Letter: Moving Black women from the margins to the centre in narrating South Africa's political transition

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> "The TRC failed to recognise women as actors and activists in their own right - women who fought to defend their families, defend their lives, and to defend political gains. Khulumani facilitator, Ms Nomarussia Bonase explains that the TRC statement-takers never asked women about their political involvement or their actions within the struggle. 'They were not even asked what happened to them except as it happened to their families'" (Khulumani Support Group 2011)

There have been a significant number of cinematic representations of the South African transition into democracy as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Films such as *Forgiveness* (2004) by Ian Gabriel, *In My Country* (2005) by John Boornman and *Red Dust* (2005) by Tom Hooper are noteworthy mentions. These films centred whiteness, by privileging of voices and world views submerged in whiteness. They similarly committed the travesty highlighted in the epigraph of this paper by the Khulumani Support Group, a social movement established in 1995 by victims and survivors of apartheid violence. Black women's experiences of the brutality at the behest of the apartheid State, their intimate narratives, their multiple forms of resistance and activism, were placed at the margins in the crafting of public memory of South Africa (SA)'s political transition into a democratic state.

Zulu Love Letter (2004), by the late Bhekizizwe Peterson and Ramadan Suleman, challenged this erasure and provides a counter-narrative. Here I am interested in analysing *Zulu Love Letter* as a site of political memory work through an African Feminist theoretical lens. Borrowing from bell hooks (1984), I seek to argue that this film places Black women living in the transition from apartheid to democratic SA at the centre of public political memory. Black women such as Me'Tau and Thandeka, a grieving mother and a political journalist living in Soweto, SA's largest township, are the main characters of the film. They are placed at the centre of the narrative and not at the margins, in humanising ways that move Black women, "from object to subject" in depictions of the TRC and the transition to democracy (hooks 1992, p. 47). In doing so, *Zulu Love Letter* put forwards alternative ways of expressing trauma and pain, a language that Nthabiseng Motsemme (2004) declares 'speaks' but is not heard in dominant political discourse. Furthermore, *Zulu Love Letter* allows space to legitimise African-centred forms of addressing collective traumas and memory where rituals of mourning are prioritised. These forms of mourning challenged the idea that individuals could 'forgive' and 'move past' acts of systemic violence and oppression in the timeframe that the nation required and that was convenient for its own political objectives. Peterson and Suleman's film forces us to question: Who else's trauma, pain, and systemic marginalisation need to be buried and removed from public political view for the official script of the 'miracle nation' to be maintained?

The TRC: Forgiveness, and unity without economic justice

One of SA's greatest challenges in this democratic era has been the creation of the TRC, which attempted to address the country's violent past and sought to facilitate forgiveness and nation building. The process has been held as a success by some, dubbed as the necessary process SA needed to take to 'heal' and 'unify' its population. Its critics, such as Mamdani (2010, p. 10), however, have labelled the Commission as "credible as performance, as theatre, but failed as a social project". Mamdani (2010, p. 10) provides us with three main reasons to support his claims. Firstly, he notes that the TRC was a process of excusing "violence authorised by apartheid law"; secondly, how the Commission failed to look at the benefactors of apartheid; and lastly, he zones into the ways in which it did not facilitate justice for its victims. Delving further into the flaws of the TRC, Liepollo Pheko (2010, p. 8) argues that it failed to provide

> a platform to speak truth and create honest dialogue about the causes and consequences of apartheid atrocities, instead absolved white capital, institutionalised race oppression and colonialism, and thus forced Africans into forgiveness and collective amnesia.

In her later work, Pheko (2012, p. 8) further calls into question democratic SA's "script of the rainbow nation" in which it has "bleached and airbrushed" the history of Black dispossession, violence (structural and direct), and trauma, at the hands of white colonial settlers. Instead, Pheko (2012, p. 7) maintains that the story and public memory of the new democracy was scripted to be a happy one, to be recast and reframed in an anti-historical, depoliticalitised, anti-Black and individualistic manner that is anti-memory, which has privileged the maintenance of the dominance of Whiteness in our status quo. Moreover, the TRC repressed lingering emotions of trauma and pain of Black individuals in order to place pressure on the nation to 'heal'. As argued by Peterson (2012, p. 18), "the ills of the nation are not likely to be overcome if citizens are not granted the space and time to address their personal and localized anxieties". Furthermore, this repression led to the diagnosis given by Soyinka (1999, p. 24) who reminds us that "the victims are alive and in need of rehabilitation while their violators – as a recognizable group – pursue their privileged existence, secure in their spoils of a sordid history" that maintains the racialised and gendered class inequality and pain in SA today. This is the backdrop against which *Zulu Love Letter* emerges and responds.

The Rich Life of *Zulu Love Letter*

Zulu Love Letter was released 10 years after SA's first democratic elections and has occupied a rich life. This film is widely cited and reviewed, taught in university curriculum, and has achieved recognition through various local and international industry awards. African Feminist scholar, Kenqu (2018, p. 277) characterises *Zulu Love Letter* as "feminist countercinema texts" as the film works at "challenging and subverting constructions and representations of black women in mainstream South Africa". Acknowledging its commitment to providing a counter-narrative and centring the lives of victims and survivors of apartheid, Kruger (2012, p. 138) articulates that "*Zulu Love Letter* does not waste any time with the perpetrators of apartheid who, in the mid-1990s, still murder and destroy with

impunity". Canham (2021, p. 11) asks "Does *Zulu Love Letter* have any resonance for the present or was it a product of a particular time whose concerns have been overtaken by issues of a rapidly changing world?".

In this review essay, I argue that *Zulu Love Letter* continues to have resonance to present South African life, particularly as we continue to live through the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed lives and increased economic marginalisation of those experiencing interconnecting forms of injustices shaped by neoliberal racial capitalism, patriarchy, and queerphobia. COVID-19 has laid bare and heightened Black women's structural marginalisation in relation to economic insecurity, inadequate access to health services and safety. Yet, the State, in dealing with this pandemic – similar to the democratic transition – has failed to offer systematic responses with a gender lens.

Zulu Love Letter: Centring Black women and proving counter political memory

A significant criticism of the TRC process was that the process was never centred on the victims and survivors of the apartheid system, with its brutality and lingering effects still embodied in Black people's interior and exterior lives. Instead, it worked to cleanse and provide amnesty to individual perpetrators, while ignoring systemic injustice and reparations. Peterson and Suleman's *Zulu Love Letter* responds and attends to this. As Peterson (2012) explicitly cautioned us, *Zulu Love Letter* should be read above all as a film primarily about two Black mothers, Thandeka and Me'Tau. In the film, we are taken through Me'Tau's desperate search for the physical and spiritual remains of her anti-apartheid activist daughter, who was murdered at the hands of apartheid police officers. By taking us, its audience along in Me'Tau's search for answers, *Zulu Love Letter* reminds that the victims of the apartheid State were not just bodies, numbers, and statistics who were casualties of political struggle.

> What connects Me'Tau and Thandeka is Me'Tau's daughter, Dineo – an anti-apartheid activist who was killed by the police. Thandeka witnessed her murder and wrote about it in the paper she worked for – *Mail and Guardian*. Publishing this story led to Thandeka's arrest by the apartheid State as well as the murder of her comrade and colleague, Mike, who did not survive torture and detention. Thandeka was pregnant while detained and tortured by the apartheid State because of her activist writings. The injuries from that violent experience led to her daughter, Simangaloso, being born with a hearing disability. Due to Thandeka's continued activism, she was unable to care for her daughter and left her in the care of her parents, Ma'Khumalo and Bab'Khumalo. In the film we see the tension she experiences with her parents when she chooses to take Simangaliso back into her care. Bab'Khumalo argued with Thandeka and said "We brought her [Simangaliso] up while you were toyi-toying. And now you simply expect us to adjust to not having her around, my dear" (Peterson 2009, p. 55).

This scene and Thandeka's character work to display Black women's significant leadership and contributions in the anti-apartheid struggles. It works to challenge dominant political liberation imagery which denies the active political subjectivity of Black women, and places them solely in the private sphere – as mothers and wives in their homes, waiting, praying, and caring for their children while their husbands fought to liberate the nation. The film

places and reaffirms Black women's political involvement and agency firmly within our public memory. It shows us their various acts of resistance within the liberation struggle, and it demonstrates that they too were in the streets fighting and "toyi-toying" for a democratic future. This is an important narrative choice by Peterson and Suleman, as critics of the TRC (Kenqu 2018, p. 281) have shown

> the narrative of the TRC was not entirely gender sensitive. Women's personal and political traumas were underrepresented, and their role in the process of nation building thus did not carry equal weight in comparison to that of their male counterparts.

Furthermore, in another scene we see Me'Tau's daughter Dineo raising her fists and shouting "*Amandla*" in the faces of the White men who moments later murdered her. This paints a powerful imagery of Black women's political activism, courage, and sacrifice. These and other moments in *Zulu Love Letter* affirm the feminist principle of post-memory in memory work "which is confrontational in its relationship with history and functions 'as a means of redressing the official 'forgetting' of women's histories" (Gqola 2010, p. 21).

Screenplay writer Peterson (2012, p. 13) articulates that he was intentional in challenging patriarchal norms in the formulation of Thandeka's character; he notes that Thandeka's "independent and assertive character is one that is ill at ease with the normative expectations of what patriarchy deems as acceptable behaviour by women". Remarkably, *Zulu Love Letter* has done what most cinematic narratives and documentaries in SA have failed to do – that is, to centre Black women and disability justice in narrating the nation. As Mistry (2009, p. 33) maintains, the creators of the film

> set themselves a challenging task – of dealing with the psyche of women taunted and scarred by a social and political system that neither protects nor understands them. The women in *Zulu Love Letter* cannot trust institutional frameworks to voice their trauma.

The film is true to the fact that Black women also performed supporting and nurturing roles to their families and children under apartheid due to various intertwining histories, including the forced labour migration of Black male workers – and Me'Tau's role is a perfect representation of that. Motsemme (2004:4) argues that through analysing Black women's testimonies of the TRC, she saw how Black women expressed "a sense of being diminished" by memories of apartheid horrors and its effects. This sense of being diminished was due to the sight of the violence inflicted on their children and their inability to protect them, which impacted their sense of self. In the film Me'Tau's character speaks to some of these emotions. Although her child was murdered by an apartheid police offer, she still felt a deep need to protect her, to find her body so that her spirit can rest. Me'Tau says to Thandeka: "her soul and her bones must return to the clan; her spirit must come home" (Peterson 2009, p. 65).

Mostemme's significant work on Black women's testimonies at the TRC also challenges the forms of language legitimised at the Commission's hearings. Mostemme (2004, p. 4) underscores that

> narrations of extreme human rights violations leave many with an inability to speak about their felt pain and loss. Language fails us, as it becomes inadequate to the task of conveying the experience of systematic degradations and humiliations.

Aware of this, in *Zulu Love Letter* there are different forms of expression and languages utilised to convey Black people's pain and trauma. When Me'Tau visits Thandeka's workplace to request her assistance in finding her daughter's body, she breaks into song: "*tarhu Bawo, tarhu Bawo"* (Peterson 2009, p. 65). This moment in the film speaks to Motsemme's (2004, p. 4) argument that the country needs to be sensitive to the ways in which

> pain, suffering, humiliation and joy do not necessarily only find their expression through verbal language, but in a number of representations such as songs, dances, gestures, tears, smells, and even in silences.

Therefore, there are alternative ways to 'speak'. The song sung by Me'Tau was her 'speaking' and expressing the trauma, loss, and pain that consumed her.

As the film reckons with SA's traumatic past, *Zulu Love Letter* becomes possible for reasons noted by Gqola, who argues that "memory resists erasure" (2010, p. 8). The film provides a counter-narrative structure to other film adaptations of SA's democratic transition and the TRC that centres 'forgiveness', 'unity', 'moving forward', whiteness and patriarchal lenses towards storytelling. *Zulu Love Letter* represents what bell hooks (1992, p. 4) calls for artists to achieve – to transform images, to create alternative political archives, and to make space for the transgressive images in order to "create a context for transformation".

Seeing and honouring Black pain: In the past and the present

Zulu Love Letter provides a textured account of the undealt with trauma, and injustice towards Black people, in ways that honour people's experiences, emotions, and mental health struggles and questions the denial of redistributive justice. As asserted by Madlingozi (2015, p. 3), in SA

> justice in the form of the radical redistribution of economical, cultural, and epistemological powers is never achieved…The economy continues to be skewed, the culture and the epistemology of the settler-colonizers continue to be predominant and decolonization in the form of land re-conquest never happens.

In alignment with this perspective, *Zulu Love Letter* showcases that we cannot easily 'forgive' or 'move on' from our recent past, as many people's loved ones remain missing (dead and alive). Moreover, justice has not been served to victims of the apartheid State. *Zulu Love Letter* acknowledges the traumas that linger on in Black families, as we are shown examples of people who have not been able to move on with the nation, such as the characters of Thandeka, Me'Tau and Simangaliso.

Stuart Hall (1990, p. 226) echoes that "the past continues to speak to us", and this could not be more evident than in SA's material reality where the faces of poverty continue to be Black. While three White men own the same wealth as the bottom half of the population, it is a fact

that the country's past continues to speak (Oxfam 2017). These material inequalities have heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Black women have been the hardest impacted. In speaking to the intentions of the film to actively memorialise and gather the disremembered realities of Black South Africans, Peterson (2009, p. 20) wrote:

> We were clear that the narrative needed to explore concerns that were in danger of being ignored, repressed or glossed over because they went against the grain of the 'feel-good' mantras of the new dispensation. Not to do so was to abdicate the role of the arts in speaking the unsaid or the unspeakable

In *Zulu Love Letter,* seeing the unchallenged status quo and her remaining trauma, Thandeka expresses that she too wishes she could also move on, to "just change…find the hope, the newness" that was being promoted at the TRC (Peterson 2009). *Zulu Love Letter* reminds the country of its failures to give attention to emotional and psychological trauma experienced by Black people at the time of the TRC, through depictions of various characters, and forms of trauma that linger in the present, manifested through panic attacks, alcohol and drug abuse, insomnia and the lack of emotional attachment.

Black South Africans who lived through apartheid, ordinary citizens and activists carry undealt with traumas, utilising alcohol and drugs as coping mechanisms such as the Boud'D character in *Zulu Love Letter*. Again, the film disallows South Africans the ability to forget and erase this Black lived experience. Through the film, Peterson (2012, p. 3) further calls "for mourning to end and for healing to take place, the social pathologies that haunt the present must be recognized, exorcised and integrated into the national consciousness".

Asked by her daughter, Simangaliso, why she opted out of appearing at the TRC, Thandeka expresses that she does not understand what her appearance would achieve. She states: "nothing can compensate me for what I went through. And there is no talk of either arresting them or paying the abused families" (Peterson 2009). Thandeka's sentiments speak to the denied justice and restitution in the TRC process. SA failed in making the connections between truth, reconciliation, justice, restitution, and the healing of a nation.

Another failure of the TRC process that *Zulu Love Letter* attends to is its cultural dissonance, in the way the TRC conducted its hearings and uses of language (Peterson 2009). The language of Christianity was privileged, along with the message of forgiveness – once a person confessed, as the perpetrators did at the Commission, they got absolution. However, *Zulu Love Letter* challenges that act by centring the African custom of mourning, especially since many people are still missing and families are stuck in a traumatic confusion, without closure. As Peterson (2009, p. 23) states:

> Whiteness often intones, is to 'close the chapter on the past' and 'move on' if we are to achieve unity and the goals of the new dispensation. In many ways, such a position is to inverse of that of those, like Thandeka, who insist on upholding the ethics of mourning, whether it is through anger or the insistence on restorative justice.

In *Zulu Love Letter*, the characters in the film challenge the narrative of the 'new South Africa' and its disposition of denying the weight of the past, its traumas, forgiving and moving past

them. It beautifully contests it through centring the values of Black customs by Black families. Even as life continues and the loss of the loved one gains acceptance, that loved one does not completely disappear in the heart, lives, and practices of Black people, they are honoured as ancestors. Cultural rituals are performed, long after their passing. As Me'Tau asks, in the film, "How can you people hope to heal this land when there are so many restless souls roaming the land?". SA has still not healed; it remains tormented.

Zulu Love Letter honours the dignity of Black people who are impacted by apartheid violence and thus challenges "dominant regimes of cinematic and visual representation" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Instead of erasing the contradictions of the TRC process and Black life in SA, it lays them bare to allow for ambiguities, silences, present trauma and mourning to speak, in a way that centres Black subjectivity and Black cultural traditions. In doing so, it contributes to the project of "loving Blackness" as a political project as well as a resistance project (hooks 1992, p. 20). This work "transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life" (hooks 1992, p. 20).

Conclusion

Bhekizizwe Peterson, Professor of African Literature at Wits University, and award-winning film writer of *Zulu Love Letter,* is now an ancestor. Through his body of work, Peterson not only invited us to think and feel through unofficial, neglected, and unrecognised public and collective memories, he took Black women-driven social movements like the Khulumani Support Group seriously, which is embedded in *Zulu Love Letter*. As stated by Madlingozi (2015, p. 2) "it is not insignificant that the name of our movement 'Khulumani' is an isiZulu term that means 'Speak Out!' We are our makers of our history. We are our own inventors of our future." Peterson demanded that we remain conscious of our past and its continuing effects on our contemporary intimate, social, political, and economic realities. In this review I have shown that *Zulu Love Letter* by Bhekizizwe Peterson and Ramadan Suleman provided a counter-narrative in the depictions of SA's democratic transition and the TRC. Through depicting the interior lives of Thandeka and Me'Tau, I argued that the film firmly placed Black women's subjectivity at the centre instead of at the margins in narrations of SA's political transition. Furthermore, the film allowed for alternative expressions of memory sites to be displayed, while reminding the nation that apartheid trauma and effects still live on in the present.

Professor Peterson has left the material world, and those who knew him, including us, his students, continue to mourn and celebrate him. What remains is his work and a mission, similar to the one reflected in *Zulu Love Letter*, for justice and the restoration of African material and spiritual worlds. Through his works such as *Zulu Love Letter,* Peterson "did not buy into the rainbow even when the rainbow was still relatively new" (Canham 2021, p. 12). When his students at Wits University participated in a resistance struggle against the commodification of education through the Fees Must Fall movement, he offered a space of refuge and language to validate the critical demands for decolonialisation. This was a brave political stance when Black academics were being targeted and marginalised by the increasingly neoliberal academy.

In conclusion, African Feminists have been imploring us to acknowledge the interconnected and intersectional nature of power and systems of oppression. However, these remained politically subjugated knowledges (Lewis & Baderoon 2021). Early research conducted on the impact of COVID-19 in SA demonstrates its gendered and racialised effects and the ways in which it exacerbated entrenched historical inequalities. Casale and Posel (2020) demonstrate that during the lockdown period women experienced more net job losses, accounting for two-thirds of total jobs lost, and their unpaid care work in the home increased significantly. Furthermore, research shows that the homes which women were relegated to were unsafe spaces, as domestic violence cases increased (Dekel & Abrahams 2021). As we navigate this COVID-19 pandemic life, as well as its future impacts on our material and spiritual worlds, let us heed Peterson's lessons, be conscious and respond to historical gaps and elite impositions of official public memory. As South African poet Lebo Mashile (2016) states, "South Africa we have a problem of memory".

This matter remains unresolved; however, through Peterson's work we are reminded that memory is a continuous struggle. *Aluta Continua!*

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