

# Angifi Dladla (1950–2020): An Embodiment of *Ku Femba* as a Poetry Teaching Philosophy for Renewal

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## Abstract

Angifi Dladla’s poetry and teaching doctrines are considered tools for consciousness raising, healing and popular education for decoloniality. Through *ku femba*, an age-old practice that serves as a channel to cast away evil spells in a society bedevilled by violence, Dladla displays the relationship between man, ancestors and the otherworldly as a vehicle for decoloniality. His feisty narrative poems, “I Failed My Children” and “Marikana Chorus”, explore the spiritual dimension and infinite possibilities of experience rooted in oral and written tradition. Dladla’s Femba Writing Project, based on his philosophy of teaching poetry, affirms that poetry rooted in decoloniality reflects not only the poet’s political convictions, but a shared communal experience of those on the edges of existence who are capable enough to challenge the master’s voice (the voice of the Western canon) that often defines quality in poetry. Dladla is steeped in direct knowledge of the precarious life in South African townships; he draws on his accrued knowledge and on the complexities of history and memory to create and teach compelling poetry that resonates with the ordinary without falling into the trap of ghettoising his experience. Dladla’s poetry and teaching philosophy challenge the colonising practices that have shaped and continue to influence the teaching of poetry in South Africa. They form part of a wider agenda of defining African selfhood in a decolonial context.

**Keywords:** Angifi Dladla; *ku femba*; decoloniality; popular education; Femba Writing Project



UNISA  
Education as Change  
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>  
Volume 24 | 2020 | #8194 | 21 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/8194>  
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)  
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## Who Was Angifi Dladla?

Born on 24 November 1950 in Thaka township in Gauteng, Angifi Dladla was an established poet, with two poetry collections in English (*The Girl Who Then Feared to Sleep* [2001] and *Lament for Kofifi Macu* [2017]) and a collection in isiZulu (*Uhambo*), yet he is still on the edge of mainstream studies in poetry, especially in academia. For many years he was a creative writing teacher and the director of the Femba Writing Project, publishing school and prison newspapers, and the anthologies *Wa lala*, *Wa sala* and *Reaching Out: Voices from Groenpunt Maximum-Security Prison*. Kelwyn Sole (2010) asserts that Dladla's first poetry collection, *The Girl Who Then Feared to Sleep*, received widespread praise from critics for "its wide range of styles, voices and themes, its raw power and experimental freshness, and its heartfelt response to a society in which racism, violence and the misuse of power are still endemic. [He was] a poet who requires readers to look at compelling events and issues from which our first instinct has been to turn away."

Dladla's horror of violence is not a new phenomenon. He was born in the East Rand, which was almost the epicentre of violence, with many incidents of brutal necklacing, in the 1980s. It is estimated that over 14 000 politically motivated deaths occurred in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s mainly as a result of what was termed the "Third Force's" unleashing of black-on-black violence. This was a political strategy orchestrated by the apartheid regime to maintain its oppressive supremacy over South Africa's black majority in the service of white privilege. Scores of people were hacked to death and gunned down in trains, hostels and townships such as Katlehong, where Dladla taught for many years. Dladla, a Pan-Africanist writer and Marxist sympathiser, could not ignore this grim reality of epistemic violence ravaging the country like a plague. In his own words:

Poetry demands a search for the essence of things. The deeper I go, the more I'm sucked in and in and in. I become liberated from the physical world! Take, for example, the poem "Rubbished". That was about a schoolchild who was shot [by Inkatha] and hacked and left to die at a rubbish dump in Katlehong. I wrote this poem the very day I saw the body. Then one day, after many years of seeing people dying and visiting mortuaries to identify my relatives, I wrote "Ubuntu". This poem led me to go deeper, to write "At the government mortuary", "So turned a taxi", "Our bodies", "Rotting", "Bodies", "The dead". No matter how many corpses one sees, one cannot get used to them. (Interview in Metelerkamp 2001)

## What Is *Ku Femba*?

Dladla's aunt was a diviner. She could cure her patients who suffered from different ailments and conditions. She had many patients. Like most healers, she enjoyed singing and doing praise poetry. Dladla explains:

We used to call my aunt "mama". Her last specialisation was plunging into the river and disappearing without trace. She came out after three months. It was in the 60s. That

fascinated me. When I was at the junior secondary school I tried to ask her about her life in the depths, but she always avoided my questions. In 1975 she moved with her Zimbabwean husband and their family to Zimbabwe. She could cure people who had ingested poison, stomach aches and those with fertility problems. She did not use medicinal herbs; to those with marital problems, she acted as a psychologist. That really worked, their problems were solved. The song I remember went like this: “Lelo dlozi ela ngenzayo/ Lelo thongo eli nguBaba/ O sikhanyisele/ O sikhanyisele ...”. Most of her songs were in the language we did not understand. People said it was XiNdau. She would say “Thokoza” when greeting anyone. (Interview with the authors, 2019)

Healing through *ku femba* is a delicate practice. Dladla explained the finer details of *ku femba* and how his poetry is an embodiment of this age-old practice that serves as a channel to cast away evil spells in a society bedevilled by greed, corruption, violence and hatred. In Dladla’s poetry, which is rooted in everyday life encounters and set mainly in townships and overall the Black and African ecosphere that is characterised by centuries of neglect and uneven development, the characters often resemble a chaotic society: they are a traumatised people in need of exorcism and treatment. The characters in Dladla’s poems include denizens, beggars, drunkards, political discards, the landless who yearn to return to the occupied territories, victims of the notorious necklacing, widows who mourn the violent departure of their Marikana mine-working husbands and breadwinners. These characters from our ghetto are, in our view, the reason Dladla summons the spirit of the diviner to perform *ku femba* to determine the spirit that may be provoking the political and economic madness in individuals and society, but more importantly, to foster balance that humans must maintain with their ecosystems. According to Dladla:

*Ku femba* is a type of exorcism performed strictly by an accomplished *ku femba* specialist. Unlike the Biblical King Solomon who used a ring or a Catholic exorcist who invokes those who are in purgatory, this one invokes the Ndau ancestor from the spirit world. When the drums have reached a certain timbre and tempo the Ndau ancestor takes over the specialist’s body, sniffing out evil spirits and casting them out of the door back to the culprit who sent them. Then a breathtaking performance follows. The ancestor in the specialist’s body acts out the culprit’s unquestionable movement, voice, mannerism and boasts. That’s the opportunity for the patient and the specialist’s assistants to ask her/him questions like “Why did you bewitch me?” “What are you wearing as you speak?” (Interview with the authors 2019)

A sangoma combines ancestral powers and herbs, plants and animal fat for treatment of ailments, trauma, epilepsy, infertility and stomach aches. But Dladla, a poet whose poetry is inspired by Pan-Africanism, integrates these elements in his poetry to diagnose, chase and “steam” away demons and nightmares rooted in apartheid and colonialism that trouble township folks, using indigenous languages instead of always insisting on English. For this reason, Dladla, who understood this well, established the Femba Writing Project, whose aim is to encourage writing that is engaging and performative as well as innovative and relevant in the townships. This idea resonates with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (1986, 4) notion that “the choice of language and the use to

which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe". Msila (2020, xi) emphasises the necessity to challenge the cultural hegemony that dominated during the decades of colonial and apartheid rule.

Today, the cynicism we witness in society is mainly due to internalised aspects of Western culture. It is because of our beliefs in Western science and Western scholarship that we tend to neglect the local as we frequently underscore globalisation, perceiving the decolonial project as an antithesis of progress. Thus we realise that the first priority for the decolonisation of knowledge is cultural decolonisation.

### How Is *Ku Femba* a Tool for Decoloniality in the Teaching of Poetry?

Many of Dladla's poems bring people's history into sharp focus: their struggles against apartheid, social catharsis, loss, township violence, HIV/Aids, poverty and inequality. Consequently, the answer to these historical malformations and abuses lie in the healing power of nature, the *ku femba*, in all its ecological ramifications and manifestations. African children are often taught Anglo-Saxon poetry, which may be good, but has little cultural relevance to their social environment and circumstances. This literature undermines the history and culture of previously colonised people and their poetic traditions. The voice of the African poet is rendered dull and absent in the classroom. Even worse, it appears to be the norm in the post-apartheid poetry classroom to teach politically correct texts in pursuit of "rainbowism" and social cohesion. Dladla (interview in Penfold 2018) considers this a dangerous terrain:

Our country will be robbed of stories from the township and rural communities. The only hope will be students who studied at the multi-racial schools. But the universe has its ways and surprises. Here we are as products of Bantu Education writing poems, plays and novels.

In our interview with Dladla (2019), he made the following claims about recorded history *vis-à-vis* the quintessential roles of oral/performance poetry and other narratives:

The recorded history since 1652 is not our history. Those who replaced the apartheidists after 1994 fear our history and thus marginalised it altogether and embarked on Year Zero, just like the French or rather like the Cambodian Khmer Rouge. Thus, the so-called school history books are nothing else but self-aggrandisement of the ruling class. Our history is in oral poetry and narratives, in poetry, narratives and non-fiction written by those who fought colonialism and its appendages, but certainly not apartheid; in Malombo jazz, in [Hugh] Masekela's "Stimela" song, in Phuz'ekhemisi's "Njalo-nje" song; in township and rural graves; in the food we eat like *maotwana*, *mokgodu*, *manqina*, *skobho* as if our forefathers slaughtered their livestock or game just for this and threw away the rest; in township houses and shacks as if we did not have families, in a maid's room in the white suburbs, in our independent churches who decolonised Christianity, in the makers of history like Jesse Owens, our athlete who infuriated Hitler by winning four gold medals in Germany and Leone Jacovacci, our boxer who also

infuriated another supremacist Mussolini by demolishing Mario Bosiso, the Italian hero. There are great men and women who came before us. We need to humble ourselves and dig our long, painful, heroic and rich history. The benefits of knowing our history as poets are part of decolonising our writing, empowering and inspiring our people. We are all in war: Vonani [Bila] and Lesego [Rampolokeng] in their field; Caster Semenya and Serena Williams in their field against global racists; our scholars who must come up with new knowledge, and so on.

## How Does the Poetry “Explode” and “Resound” as *Ku Femba*?

### “I Failed my Children”

In the compelling, self-referential and confessional narrative poem, “I Failed My Children”, Dladla gives an account of physical loss and the recovery of ancestral land and other social and spiritual landscapes. These were taken away as a result of colonial and apartheid machinations that made black people subservient to barbaric purposes. In this poem, the nostalgic children yearn for the rural utopia. Although urbane, they are restless. They dislike the crowded cities of fierce and roaring traffic, deadly highways, of vagabonds buried in trash under bridges who warm themselves around galley fires in winter and the zoo and prison enclosures. They helplessly watch the rich sip coffee in sit-down restaurants in affluent Sandton and other suburbs. The smog spiralling in the air in Soweto, the banalities of commercialisation and media culture make these children yearn to return to the land and nature. They persistently demand alternative ways to have an intense bond with their ancestral homes: locations from which their great-grandparents were forcibly removed under the insane and dehumanising apartheid laws such as the Natives Land Act of 1913 or the Bantu Authority Act, 68 of 1951, which provided for the establishment of black homelands and regional authorities. Born-free children want to remember the unknown past as part of liberation and a self-healing peace-building passage.

The inquisitive children, including the last-born girl who is the leader of the pack, insist dialogically that their deflated and somnambulant father pays attention to them. They want to pay homage to their ancestors. They want to be one with the cosmic forces. Their dreams are surrounded by the poignant and romantic rural picaresque and the unexplored venerable forests. Sadly, the children do not know that their felt need may flounder. This is because the loathsome and frenzied “apartheiders”, and their aggressive hordes of insensible and indistinguishable ethnographers, historians, strategists, social anthropologists, cartographers, cultural commissars and the repressive military, have systematically carried out an onslaught to diminish any fragment of black people’s scattered history. Ancient black civilisations, remnants of social memory, the everyday arts, black people’s sense of self and collective consciousness and any iota of dignity have all been destroyed. The apartheid regime excluded the black majority on matters of governance and the economy to inflict a notion of exile, self-pity, loneliness and black people’s alienation from the land, nature and the spiritual realm, thus propagating deep racial, social and political divisions and the weakening, even collapsing, of political and economic structures and the prevailing ideologies,

expressions and identities of indigenous Africans. As Dladla the poet (and, equally, the textual persona in the poem) veritably laments this ongoing dialectic struggle and conflicting paradigm, “That place with its graves/ no longer exists. It’s now a potato farm.” In the words of the born-free:

“No manga-manga business dad, Dad,  
no pussyfooting, we now are serious.  
This December, you show the way.

“We drive you where you were born,  
to the house where you grew up.  
We want to capture the aura.  
Then we’ll be complete.

“You show us the way where  
your navel cord was buried.  
You show us the way where bones  
of your people are rooted, our ancestors.

...”

That place with its graves  
no longer exists. It’s now a potato farm,  
so I was told. We had never returned.  
We never dream to this day.

Who could return after bulldozers,  
storm troopers, rottweilers bundled us  
in trucks with our cats, dogs  
and broken furniture to far-off locations?  
(Dladla 2011, 26–7)

In Dladla’s world, “there’s something that the dead know”, whether this be the pain of slavery, colonialism, Sharpeville, Soweto, Bhishe or Boipatong massacres, or post-apartheid massacres such as Marikana and the death of 144 Life Esidimeni patients, or any social carnage, such as necklacing and xenophobia:

Something the dead know  
is the head held in broken hands;  
the drooping mouth-hole,  
a white speck of eye  
leaking a tough sort of shame,  
a burnt rubber which blackens blackness  
and wires which swaddle the victim  
like a Pharaoh.

Something the dead know:

Bones whiter than white  
shall inherit the earth.  
(Dladla 2017, 78–9)

In the sequel and hybrid poem “Marikana Chorus”, Dladla combines the dramatic technique of performance poetry and the prophetic voice to make the connection between the dead and the living even more symbiotic. This is part of invoking the *ku femba* spirit.

### “Marikana Chorus”

... the ragged miners sing, kneel, burn *impepho* incense, sprinkle the snuff, clap hands rhythmically as they talk to the spirit people .... Around the monument they empty their hearts in dance. (Dladla 2017, 86)

In the above epigraph, the speaker summons the powers of the ancestors to help the so-called “wildcat” striking workers of the Association of Mines and Construction Union (AMCU), under the leadership of Joseph Mathunjwa, to defeat the plutocratic Lonmin mine, now taken over by Sibanye Stillwater. Dladla’s deep sense of history makes us aware that the Marikana massacre saw 34 mineworkers, who were demanding a living wage and decent working conditions, slaughtered and 78 more injured on 16 August 2012.

Oral history suggests that Marikana derives from the Setswana word *Marakanelo*, meaning “a meeting place”. The hill is also known for miracles. It is claimed that in the past invisible people could be heard singing, shouting and dancing. Traditional healers would train their apprentices on the mountain and perform rituals at this meeting place. Perhaps that is why the hill or *koppie* became known as *Thaba ya Dimakatso* or Mountain of Wonders. We can understand the claim, which Dladla highlights as tragicomic, that the Fanagalo-speaking workers consulted a sangoma who would make them brave and invisible when they confronted the police.

According to a *News24* report titled “Marikana Men Queued for Muti—Police”,<sup>1</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Victor Visser told the Farlam Commission that “the men gathered at the koppie, carrying pangas, spears, and knobkerries, and believed the inyanga would sprinkle them with muti to make them brave”. Sadly, the muti of the sangoma<sup>2</sup> did not protect them against the state police’s bullets nor did it triple their money. In the poem “Marikana Chorus”, Dladla relives and even imagines the tragic collaboration between the South African government, its alliance partners (the South African Communist Party

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally accessed at <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Marikana-men-queued-for-muti-police-20121108> (accessed 9 September 2019). It has since been removed from the *News24* website.

<sup>2</sup> *Inyanga* and *sangoma* are both isiZulu words for a traditional healer. *Muti* is slang for the medicine prepared by traditional healers.

[SACP], the Congress of South African Trade Unions [COSATU]) and international capital, implying that the state can get away with mass murder with impunity.

Your AMCU is a small cockroach,  
it needs a mild spray or a toddler's toe.  
It is toothless, noisome like an anus.

Today is D-day—the end  
of this criminal act.  
Today is your hour—the finale  
Of this dastardly venture.

Come on SACP and COSATU  
Close ranks, isolate, petrify AMCU  
Come on People's Storm Troopers,  
Encircle these bastards in the manner  
That you are trained to do.

I give you a helicopter, razor wire,  
Rottweilers, horses, machine guns.  
Come down hard on these dissidents.

Shoot the magodukas, shoot merafes  
Execute these fucken migrants!  
Let our thunderbolts shame  
The magic of their witchdoctors!

Come on, each shot be a kill-shot.  
One, Two, Three: FIRE ...!  
(Dladla 2017, 84–5)

The poet knows that the dead miners are not dead; their restless spirits must be safely repatriated to their places of origin. Sadly, the children of the stone-breaking miners have lost fathers. These men, from all over the South African nation, but mainly from the Eastern Cape, were shot several times in the back, shoulders, thighs, buttocks, groin and feet by the guns of the new government. Wives are now widows; their husbands who provided love, bread and soup are dead. There are whirlwinds in families that were once stable. This upheaval is all because of the government's collusion with international capital, through the hand of its police officers, who decided to gun down dozens of black workers. Dladla implies that the state mowed down black lives to protect the riches of the mining magnates. The dead remain restless; they speak in shrieking voices of multitudes of organised workers:

Marikana, Marikana,  
*tina ai funa lo* New Apartheid.  
World Trade Centre Accord  
through TEBA and the barracoons



never was for us workers.

...

Marikana, Marikana  
you have cartwheeled us  
from Cecil Rhodes' road  
into a ghostly canyon.

Marikana, Marikana,  
today you know what is not new:  
"The driving force of civilization".  
Workers of England or Europe,  
today you know what is not new:  
Our blood relations, O Engels!  
(Dladla 2017, 86–7)

Although 34 Lonmin workers were killed by fire from the R5 assault rifles used by the South African Police Services (SAPS), the calamitous Marikana Day has become a memorable day. It is commemorated by the people, especially the workers and supposedly "left-leaning" political parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and civil society groups as a manifestation of the actualities of ecological damage and injustices to workers generally. During these commemorations, one can see rituals for the departed souls being performed by religious sects, including traditional healers. Just after the Marikana murders, the place had to be cleansed. The spirits of the dead were collected and then repatriated to safe cultural spaces (their homes). They were not taken to modern-day alienating memory institutions, such as museums, galleries, libraries or archives in the big cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town or in foreign lands, but to warm "homes" in the villages, farms and townships where they had originated. Once back home and in the company of the clan and ancestry, it is assumed that the dead can regain their voices and unimaginable power. This would not happen if they were kept in foreign memory institutions. The dead are then connected to their ancestors through rituals that are characterised by feasting, drinking, dancing and above all, poetry performance.

The spirit repatriation and cleansing ceremony is carried out as part of family, community and cultural heritage and pride. Its aim is to promote respect, remembrance and understanding and it is a necessary sacred healing process for the grieving family, community or country to find closure. If the spirits of the dead are not properly returned to their homes, indigenous cultural experts and poets, such as Dladla, argue that disaster may strike in the form of repeated underground mining accidents, storms, floods, road fatalities and other mysterious disasters and pandemics. One can equally argue that the Marikana massacre may have dampened the spirits of voters to ignore the African National Congress (ANC) in national polls, thus gifting the opposition some of the metropolitan municipalities. Dladla's poetry of *ku femba* may be teaching us that the

dead are saying to the structures in power—whether these be corporates or governments—that they must correct their wrongs, compensate families that lost their beloved breadwinners and pay the workers, take care of the poor, the sick and unemployed. Dladla’s concern for historical reparations for damages caused to people and ecology—black labourers, their native land and mineral resources—is a demand for ethical leadership and ecological justice for the living and to set free the departed souls of the working class. This call for social justice and cultural cleansing is a crucial decolonial aspect of Dladla’s poetry.

The following section interrogates Dladla’s poetry teaching philosophy and how *ku femba* challenges the colonising practices that have shaped and continue to influence the teaching of poetry in South Africa.

### How Does *Ku Femba* Mediate Dladla’s Poetry Teaching Philosophy?

Dladla believed that poetry can be taught. He founded the Femba Writing Project (FWP), an initiative that takes into cognisance students’ backgrounds and the tradition of poetry, like *ku femba*, as a style of African performance that is rooted in therapy. For Dladla (2017, 11), “Students are not potatoes in a bag, but individuals with unique personalities, unique life experience and therefore unique needs that cry for individual attention, real growth and development.” Dladla further highlights his commitment to writing and teaching poetry:

The inner voice comes readily especially when I’m editing. There is excitement and joy as I concentrate on the text. That’s when a flash of insight comes in. Yes, just like music and fine art, poetry can be taught. But not like in the colonial classroom where a topic and a title is prescribed to the learner, and the teacher starts with teaching poetic devices such as rhyme, figures of speech, and types of poetry. Under an able master the student feels and experiences the beauty of the music but the master does not encourage the student to play and sing like him. He just inspires. My motto is “Everyone has a story.” Even a child from the kindergarten tells stories. (Interview in Penfold 2018)

Despite being unheralded and almost unknown in academia, Dladla wrote and taught poetry in schools, prisons and community centres for over 30 years, in multicultural settings. His poetry has appeared in almost all major South African literary journals, yet it is hardly made available in mainstream anthologies and the classroom. He has taught the young and old, prisoners, refugees, perpetrators of necklacing murders of the 1980s, political activists, high school students, peasants in shacks and the rich in comfort zones, the weak and uncomfortable, the politically charged and the intransigent and embittered in the East Rand, introducing them mainly to African and contemporary South African poetry, as well as critical texts from the African diaspora.

Dladla’s teaching philosophy encourages students to appreciate poetry set for examination, but primarily to enjoy it and allow it to raise their consciousness before they can “deconstruct” a poem for technical analysis. Dladla believed that students can

enjoy poetry and use it to develop self-love, instead of seeing themselves as savages, barbarians or commodities ready to be exploited and disposed of. They need not focus on technical inhibitions, poetic terminology, moral maps of what is good, true, beautiful or ugly. He inspired them to write original work with aesthetic considerations and for the benefit of posterity. For Dladla, teaching poetry meant the creation of space for the sharing of knowledge so that those who receive it can improve their lives and the lives of those they meet. Teaching, therefore, aimed to create renewed, energised and decolonised beings. Echoing Fanon, Ntombela (2020) contends that in decolonisation, “there is replacement of the settler, re-establishment of the marginalized and re-ordering”. Msila (2020) argues that the decolonisation of the school system refers to the dismantling of colonial and apartheid systems that were responsible for the oppressive and marginalising divisions. Msila posits:

Decolonisation needs to move us from barbarity to freedom, from brainwashing classrooms to enriching critical sites, from stunted growth to intellectual freedom and expression. The gift of decolonized education is immense for our learners and the future in that it will ensure that the learners move beyond the realm of bondage of history to liberatory education that ensure[s] the magnification but not the romanticisation of the African continent. (Msila 2020, 5)

Dladla’s teaching doctrine built students up intellectually and in all facets of human activity so that they could become positive change agents in the private and public domains for decolonial education and renewal. To understand decoloniality, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986, 16) grapples with the way the colonialists imposed a foreign language on African children.

The real aim of colonisation was to control people’s wealth: what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control, in other words, the entire realm of life. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized: the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.

Steve Biko (1987), Frantz Fanon (2017) and Es’kia Mphahlele (1974; 2002) (among others) have stated that language and culture are tools for liberation for the colonised and oppressed. Vuyisile Msila and Mishack Gumbo, key figures of the current discourse about decoloniality in South Africa, emphasise that when black people use indigenous languages to express themselves instead of English they feel a sense of adequacy, resourcefulness, identity, pride and purpose. Msila has lobbied government, universities and education policy-makers to adopt holistic, inclusive and socially just curricula that are rooted in African expression and the untapped experiences of rural folk in Africa’s history.

Dladla believed that the role of the teacher in bringing about this renewal did not need to perpetuate racial, gender and ethnocentric misunderstanding. He embraced the culture and customs of his people, but he wanted his students to recognise that culture adds to their social consciousness, personal identity, critical thinking, and happiness. He explains his poetry teaching philosophy and goals as follows:

My teaching methodology compels me not to rest on my laurels. I usually teach a mixed class consisting of adults, youth, children from nine years old, those who prefer English, and those who prefer the mother tongue. I come to class without a textbook, without notes or a lesson plan. Everyone has a story! To me students ... are individuals with unique personalities, unique life experiences, unique stories, and therefore unique needs that cry for individual attention, real growth and development. Each individual is an authority of his or her own story but they are not always aware of what they know, or they have forgotten it, or they just take it for granted that the reader knows as well. (Interview in Penfold 2018)

We can deduce from Dladla's teaching philosophy that he preferred the Communicative Language Teaching approach, a method that stresses communication. In Dladla's philosophy, the student unpacks factors that determine their existence, their familiar environments, their sense of beauty and the losses they have experienced. He encouraged students to create a connection between their lives and what is directly observable in their environment and bodies—what may be regarded as the quotidian—a representation and reproduction of everyday reality. These tasks were carried out either as classwork or homework and students were encouraged to work dialogically or in silence, depending on the nature of the student, as a key component of transferring knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to the learners that will make them recognise their common needs and dangers and prepare them to be Africans without inferiority complexes.

Dladla inspired his students to listen, read and write poems, but more importantly, to develop opinions about themselves and the world so that they could challenge their own underdevelopment and powerlessness. He stimulated students' sense of imagination by providing them with free-writing poetry exercises, usually based on memory and history. For example, in *Mene Tekel*, Dladla's play about the scourge of necklace murders in the 1980s, he used the boys and girls who had been affected by necklacing as performers. After the performances, the parents invited the poet for lunch or supper, and asked: "How did you do that? SAP [South African Police] failed. SADF [South African Defence Force] failed. But with you ... these boys, they changed" (Metelerkamp 2001). He encouraged the violent boys and girls who fuelled chaos in the East Rand to verbalise their horrible experiences as part of snuffing out the malevolent spirits that were haunting them (as perpetrators of necklace murders) and the community (as victims). This is an effective cleansing and purification ritual, aimed at restoring the identities and reintegrating the perpetrators of ritual murders back into their families and communities.

Dladla's teaching philosophy discouraged moral arrogance and "parrot" learning. He asked his students to do research in order to discover new information, but warned them that this freedom of expression did not extend to perpetuating racial or gender stereotypes and prejudices. Although he went to class often with no textbook, notes or a lesson plan, he was able to adjust to the expectations of his usually overcrowded class because of years of experience in poetry teaching and mastery of his accommodating teaching methodology.

In June 2020 Dladla listed poets on his Facebook page who had influenced and stirred him over the years. They included the Black Consciousness poet and struggle veteran, Don Mattera (*Azanian Love Song*), Okot p'Bitek (*Song of Lawino*), Mazisi Kunene (*The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*), B.W. Vilakazi (*Inkondlo kaZulu*), Pushkin (*The Bronze Horseman and Other Poems*), D.B.Z. Ntuli (*Imvunge Yemvelo*), Bashi (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*), and Yannis Ritsos (*The Fourth Dimension*). These poets and their texts are mentioned to inspire the students to be enthusiastic about poetry and challenge remnants of coloniality in social, political and economic structures when he teaches students how to create original work that shares the idiomatic and cultural register of his community.

In Mattera (1935–), Dladla identifies one of the brave pioneers of Black Consciousness lyrical poetry in South African English and Isicamtho/Ringas (derogatorily called Tsotsitaal). Like Dladla, Mattera suffered forced removals and detention. Both have striking gifts, both pedagogic and political. Dladla's poem, "I Failed My Children" chronicles his childhood memories of being uprooted by the apartheid government from his ancestral land, while Mattera's memoir, *Memory Is the Weapon* (2010) is an account of life in Sophiatown (a truly cultural mosaic) from which he was forcibly removed. Both performance poets enact "sonic layering", as C.M.E. Graebner describes performance poetry and its public function. The sonic qualities of language imply "the simultaneous interaction of words, speech, music, non-verbal sounds, the poet's voice, and poetic imagery that appeal to our smell, taste and vision" (Graebner 2007, 2). As a poetry teacher and poet, Dladla would rather teach this kind of "oral" poetry in the syllabus as relevant work to inspire interest in local cultural heritage.

D.B.Z. Ntuli and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906–1947) are considered fathers of modern isiZulu letters—especially poetry—and outstanding teachers and linguists. Dladla is fascinated by Ntuli and Vilakazi's commitment to education and literature. Vilakazi was the first black South African to receive a PhD in literature. In his isiZulu poem "Imbeleni", loosely translated as "Should Death Knock at My Door", the poet anticipates his demise. Critic and isiZulu poet Sandile Ngidi observes: "He wants to be buried along the road, to say hello to school children" (Ngidi 2020). One can argue that Vilakazi is calling for the necessity of recovering buried history, especially stories and memories of the people who live under the shadow of cultural shame and indignity. This yearning to give a voice to buried narratives allows Dladla and Ngidi to understand Vilakazi's poems as embodiments of communal experiences and figments of

imagination that should be memorialised in irresistible lyrical, dramatic and narrative monuments. Such immortalisation of the local voice means decoloniality within the global landscape. Dladla could be celebrating Vilakazi partly because there is a famous street in Soweto, where iconic figures Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu lived, which is named in his honour.

In Mazisi Kunene (1930–2006), Dladla is attracted by the poet’s commitment to indigenous languages, orature and the Zulu heritage. Mpalive-Hangson Msiska describes Kunene as an indigenous poet who saw himself as part of a specifically African tradition of written and oral culture. Most of his poetry in English was first written in isiZulu. Kunene employs such traditional genres as the funeral dirge, the war song, the praise song and the elegy. He also includes elements of traditional religion and cosmology, such as ancestor worship (Hamilton and Noel-Tod 2013, 331).

Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* was first published in 1966 in the Luo language. It is an epic poem that laments an African woman’s cry against her husband’s abandonment of the past in favour of Western traditions. Guershom Kambasu Muliro (2007) observes:

The poem poses a question: what kind of liberation should Africa take on? Should it honor its traditions, or should it adapt the European values that were already set in place during colonialism?

In Yannis Ritsos (1909–1990), Dladla may have found resonance with the Greek poet’s radicalism and triumph over tribulations. His youth was marked by family devastation: economic ruin, the early death of the poet’s mother and eldest brother and his father’s commitment to a mental health facility after psychological disturbance. Ritsos spent four years (1927–1931) in a sanatorium to recover from tuberculosis (Poetry Foundation n.d.). These deeply felt events compare sharply with the ferocious violence and substandard living conditions of Africans in the townships, informal settlements and villages. For Dladla, the panacea for such human crisis requires the healing intervention of *ku femba* as a poetic mode to bring about balance between humans and nature across “race”, language, class and geography. According to *Poetry Foundation* (2020), one of Ritsos’s most celebrated works, the “Epitaphios”, is a lament inspired by the assassination of a worker in a large general strike in Salonica. The poem was burned by the Metaxas dictatorship, along with other books, in a ceremony in front of the Temple of Zeus in 1936. Similarly, in “Marikana Chorus”, Dladla pays homage to the striking workers who were murdered by the South African Police Services in 2012.

Dladla’s approach did not bar him from reflecting on the shameful history of slavery, colonisation and grim apartheid violence, especially since he studied and taught history in high school. In class and writing workshops, he introduced radical figures such as Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, W.E.B. Du Bois, Steve Biko, Malcolm X, Robert Sobukwe and others who spoke of the undeniably heavy burden of oppression and inferiority of the black majority, as part of his quest to use history to build a truly humane society. Dladla believed a deeper understanding of decoloniality in the

classroom implies building bridges between Africans in Africa and in the diaspora, fostering the appreciation of different poetic traditions, enhancing cultural solidarity and not limiting oneself to the cultural and poetic ghetto. He achieved this objective by steadily introducing his students to a varied set of poetic traditions and influences such as anti-imperialist poet Amiri Baraka's "A Poem for Black Hearts" (1965), a tribute to Malcolm X, a popular figure during the US civil rights movement who was assassinated in 1965.

For all of him, and all of yourself, look up  
black man, quit stuttering and shuffling, look up,  
black man, quit whining and stooping, for all of him,  
For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest  
until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals  
that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if  
we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of  
the earth.

Another of Dladla's favourite poems is Leopold Sedhar Senghor's<sup>3</sup> "Prayer to the Masks" (1945), in which the speaker looks back to his ancestral African roots as a source of strength and cultural decolonisation as he fights European colonisation:

Masks! Oh Masks!  
Black mask, red mask, you black and white masks,  
Rectangular masks through whom the spirit breathes,  
I greet you in silence!  
And you too, my panther headed ancestor.  
You guard this place, that is closed to any feminine laughter, to any mortal smile.  
You purify the air of eternity, here where I breathe the air of my fathers.

When students hear stories such as Malcolm X's, which are similar to their experience, they often reflect on their domestic icons such as Andries Tatane, a 33-year-old who was shot and killed by police officers during a service delivery protest in Ficksburg in the Free State province. They pour out their emotions through stories, songs and poems, vividly aware of the narrator of their tales, in their languages of choice (not always English). This methodology implies that even in the absence of the facilitator or teacher, students can empower themselves provided they are self-driven, serious, honest, disciplined, able and accentuate the positive and thrifty with resources at their disposal. Dladla echoes Ngũgĩ's sentiments (1986, 97) that "African literature, literature of the African diaspora, and all other literatures of related experiences must be at the core of the syllabuses".

Dladla's *ku femba* philosophy has strong affinities with the Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, who once said: "Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your creative individuality

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<sup>3</sup> Senghor (1906–2001) served as Senegal's first president from 1960 to 1980.

alone must decide” (cited in Berold and Stacy 2017, 12). The process of making poetry, according to Dladla, is driven by achievement, correction, improvement and success.

Dladla’s poetry teaching philosophy was learner-centred rather than rigidly didactic. It was not top-down, exclusive, elitist, predetermined or simply aimed at perfecting a certain technique, such as mastering the use of a poetic device. It was education for the powerless, grassroots, disadvantaged and exploited social groups such as students in broken-down schools in East Rand townships. He was concerned to teach in a way that responded to the social context. His approach was political and aimed at social change and transformation. It dramatised the harsh realities of unjust township existence and celebrated black spiritual endurance. Dladla upheld these ideals of popular education in line with Brazilian popular education theorist, Paulo Freire (1970), who steadfastly believed that the learning process should be facilitated to assert the rights of the affected community, promote robust debate, encourage questioning and confront authority if necessary. Further, it should ignite in learners the spirit of self-reliance and the building of alternative visions so that they can take full responsibility for their destinies.

In an interview with Roger Dalea and Susan Lee Robertson (2004), Portuguese-born activist Boaventura de Sousa Santos highlights that structural inequalities are the reasons that people resist corporate globalisation, including market-driven education offered by schools and universities. As a counter to this form of globalisation, Santos has proposed the creation of a Popular University of Social Movements, “a global university from below, indeed a counter-university aimed at bringing together activists of social movements and social scientists/artists engaged in participatory research-action” (Dalea and Robertson 2004, 7). Dladla’s Femba Writing Project exemplified Santos’s vision of a grassroots university as an instrument for decoloniality, education, empowerment and change.

Santos further argues that other forms of resistance in education should involve a complex articulation between participatory democracy and techno-democratic qualification. In his own words (cited in Dalea and Robertson 2004, 7):

We need qualified citizens for the tasks ahead but not in such a way that they become professionalised participatory citizens. Without a very wide range of qualifications for common citizens it will be impossible to promote forms of participatory democracy capable of being the organising element behind the counter-hegemonic forms of globalization.

Despite inhabiting separate geographies, Dladla and Santos shared the need to challenge corporate power through decolonial education measures and strengthen South-South cooperation. This sentiment is equally shared by the Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel (2011), whose “Radical Universal Decolonial Anti-Systemic Diversity” project resonates with Dladla’s *ku femba*, if one considers the struggles of African people against dispossession, including the fight to speak through poetry, even if it means in the ancient *ku femba* language of Xindawu. As opposed to the abstract



universals of Eurocentric epistemologies, which subsume/dilute the particular into the same, a “radical universal decolonial anti-systemic diversity” is a concrete universal that builds a decolonial universal by respecting multiple local particularities in the struggle against patriarchy, capitalism, coloniality and Eurocentric modernity from a diversity of decolonial epistemic/ethical historical projects.

Dladla’s ecosphere was constituted by *ku femba* as an intangible spiritual poetic presence that interacts with physically and psychologically injured communities, such as poverty-stricken learners and victims of violence. Throughout his writing and teaching career, Dladla (2017, 12) developed the guiding principles of his innovative Femba Writing Project to underlie his pedagogy of sensitivity to the spiritual realm. Dladla recalls an astonishing incident in 1979 when he was a new teacher in Vosloorus:

One day immediately after break, I was writing something on the board, and students were coming in. Then something came storming in. It was a wild man, kicking, punching, biting and scratching the hell out of me. Fortunately, the boys dragged and kicked him out. Girls were pleading to them he must not be killed “It is Mahlomola, the local madman.” (Interview in Metelerkamp 2001)

After this incident, students and teachers were always laughing at him. Dladla calmly decided to write a poem titled “The Intruder”. He read it in his classes and students loved it. The headmaster demanded that he reads the poem for the whole student body at the school assembly. As Dladla emphasises: “That was the end of laughter ...” (Berold 2003, 176). He had managed to cast a spell through poetry. Poetry no longer had to be taught in its usual formal Eurocentric fashion, but became a living syllabus capable of mediating and healing the fresh wounds of social strife and bringing about a decolonial turn.

The Femba Writing Project is a practical programme, which begins with students identifying their strengths and weaknesses. The safe learning space encourages learners to share experiences. It is democratic and participatory and projects (in the form of writing assignments) are carried out in class and in the broader community.

## The Significance of Dladla’s Poetry Work in South Africa

Dladla explained his role as that of a poet in the community. He was angry over poor service delivery and other government excesses, but he remained patriotic. He declared that his work was not about the illusion of a great South African landscape and wild game. Although Dladla’s work was influenced by a number of writers, he did not echo their voices. His poetry is neither a mimicry of Western poetry nor the projection of an uncritical African past:

A poet is the conscience and pulse of his or her people. Our people are angry. In Afrikaans they are *gatvol* or very fed-up. This is demonstrated by daily service delivery protests. As expected, the police respond with overkill. The poet as a responsible citizen

cannot be neutral and soft while the politicians are increasingly binge eating and hoarding more than they need amid dire poverty. Still, our leaders remain bigheaded, insensitive, and offensive. (Interview in Penfold 2018)

Dladla's observations are a sharp reminder that 26 years into democracy, the poor are damned by their own comrades who probably seek guidance from elsewhere, for example from large corporates, instead of carrying out the mandate of their constituencies. Dladla highlights that under the guise of freedom, people's expectations of a better life for all have floundered. It is as if he is evoking Frantz Fanon's (2017, 300) warning:

If we want to respond to the expectations of our peoples, we must look elsewhere besides Europe. Moreover, if we want to respond to the expectations of the Europeans we must not send them back a reflection, however ideal, of their society and their thought that periodically sickens even them. For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man.

Robert Berold, the publisher of Dladla's two collections in English, notes that the poet lived in a spiritual reality and managed to observe human life without being overwhelmed by the pain we inflict on one another.

For Dladla, there was no area of life that poetry should not investigate: his range was vast, from personal joy and pain, love and family relationships, to the largest political and historical questions. Humour and satire were his subjects too. He was especially interested in poems dealing with spiritual mysteries and prophecies, both within and outside African spiritual perspectives. His concerns were always refracted through a lively and down-to-earth language: he wanted his poetry to be understandable to his own community, who were his primary audience.

Kelwyn Sole is a Marxist intellectual who has affinities with its democratic rather than its Stalinist forms. He studied and taught the literature of Black Consciousness (BC) for more than 30 years. What he found different about Dladla's work compared with the BC poets of the 1970s, when he first came across it, was that:

Angifi is a purveyor of Pan-Africanism not in terms of any Party politics, or the way some young people are using the term nowadays, but in terms of its potential as a gentle, humanising and embracing philosophy. It seems to me that we have an intellectual and creator in Angifi who bases himself in the reality of township life, and has a view of the world that starts—and radiates outwards—from there. Yet from there it radiates into the continental and global: willing to embrace, into his worldview, the creative, open-minded and progressive potential of the human race ... from his basis in the reality of his own life, race, and class among his community. (Sole, interview with Vonani Bila, 2019)

In conclusion, Dladla's philosophy of poetry teaching affirms that art is a potent tool for social healing. He encouraged his students to write about their own lives and their

own experiences. They work from within, living their characters. In his words, “Great poets are not cheap singers praising what is imperfect, disposable and dying. They praise only the universe ... the Almighty God!” (interview in Metelerkamp 2001). Upon hearing about Dladla’s death on 17 October 2020 aged 69, Johannesburg poet Alan Finlay described him on Facebook as “a quiet and brilliant poet, who said the hardest things in the quietest way. He never felt the need to shout” (Finlay 2020).

Rest in peace Angifi Proctor Dladla, uDibi Lwase Sandlwana, Muntu wa Bachaki, Mgabadel!

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