

10/13/2023: ON THE BODY

A person's body affects the way they navigate the world, and their experiences in it. How much power does a body (with regard to, for instance, race, gender, sexuality, physical ability) have over, or in, an artist's work? And, with what devices can a writer affect issues their body can present—for instance, via symbolism, or by changing media, or in the physical circumstances of reading and writing?

1. Busisiwe MAHLANGU (South Africa)

When I find myself stuck in my writing, I ask myself questions. My favourite is: where in the body does the poem live? Which part of me houses the story? Which part communicates back? For writing is a reciprocal dance of receiving and giving, of listening and responding. This interplay is not confined to the dynamic between the writer and the reader but extends to the act of writing and the resulting creation.

Poetry, in its essence, is a labour of emotions, a realm of challenges and invocations. While the body is a reservoir of sensations, experiences, and emotions. I believe that in paying close attention to how the poem resides within one's body, one can discover new thinking. My body serves as a vessel in this transaction. Both on stage and on paper. The body is the one that bears witness.

Audre Lorde once said, "Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge. They are chaotic, sometimes painful, sometimes contradictory, but they come from deep within us. And we must key into those feelings... This is how new visions begin."

In 2016, #FeesMustFall protests took place across South African universities. I was a student at Wits University then. After what felt like an endless attack of rubber bullets and tear gas, I watched three women students stripped naked in front of armed police. They marched towards the police with their arms raised. It was a clear display and reminder that as students, we were unarmed, that we wanted nothing more than free and equal education. Days later, I would read online posts and articles trying to reduce this act of bravery into a debate about the women's bodies. It is also important how we write about women and their bodies, in literature, in spaces of protest, in the every day. Simply.

It was one of the loudest forms of resistance I've ever seen. Language takes on different shapes - in practice, in movement, in acts. Sometimes words are not enough because no one will listen. Because there's no time to talk or write when only surviving. But if the body is an archival site for memory, then stories cannot die, and in this way, memory can be inherited. As a student who was re-learning resistance songs in distress in a democratic South Africa, I was hopeless about the future. But there are moments that allow cracks to open, and hope slips in. The #FeesMustFall protest, that day in front of the Great Hall, was painful, but also hopeful in some ways. In writing, I am trying to find ways of resistance and protest, of forging new paths and imagining the future. Sometimes when words cannot do that, I look to history, I look to the people that have done this. There's a long recorded archive and, some of it, we can already access through ourselves. Our bodies are our inheritance, our legacy, our

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archive. As writers, we must bear witness.

Silence as Prayer

Even if we don't speak

the language of the heart survives

Heart bears too much/ is just blood and muscle/ cannot show you the way to tomorrow/ cannot break
the meeting of your fears/ cannot clean up the mess in your mind/ you close your eyes and pray it away/
you trust your gut again.

Silence as sacrifice,

you give your mouth to someone for safekeeping,

they teach it how to say your name wrong.

Your tongue is a thing history scolds/ a wood statue/ chop off this side you will be beautiful/ chop off
that side you will disappear/ you sound like you swallowed a swarm of bees/ you will not taste honey
poisoning yourself this way.

Silence as death

the blood remembers/ there's nothing to fear.

Blood mourns in a body/ gathers the ghosts of the past and bleeds the memories/ you are meant to
heal/ wash the blood that consumes freedom

Silence as secrets

where is the unspoken/ the silenced bodies/the unjust/ language being bent for an image?

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