6 Getting the story right and telling it well

Decolonising research and academic writing through storytelling and collaborative writing

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6.1 Food for thought: How community research sparked collaborative writing

This chapter is a collaborative piece between two women who have cooperated in research projects and studies, genuinely appreciate each other's work, and are attempting to explore power relations in research through collaborative writing. The co-authoring of this chapter is the culmination of many circumstances. We come from different economic, social, and political backgrounds and were introduced through the first author's, Sanelisiwe's, mother who collaborated on food injustice research in Cape Town with the second author, Nicole. We were drawn together by shared passion for reading and writing. Some years later, we tested the power of storytelling to disrupt power binaries in academia and we collaborated on a study on the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised communities in Cape Town. Today, we work in a research programme together and explore community kitchens as hubs for nutritional justice and wellbeing. Our writings, so far, have been inspired by our different lived experiences and the different texts we read and write, but most of all, by our shared resistance to colonised academic systems, the sluggishness of universities, and the power of a story.

In the first section of this chapter, we juxtapose our personal inspirations by sharing the texts that shape our ways of thinking. In the second section, we describe the state of inequalities in the academic world and what decolonial writing means from our different perspectives. We conclude with a dialogue between us about co-writing processes.

Storytelling in academia is often only used to highlight the history and implications of a problem and often comes as an opening or conclusion to a more structured essay which features problem statement argumentation to unravel the issue, its history, and its relevance then set out actions for changing perspectives to reach proposed outcomes. In our research, storytelling methodology has brought the root causes of problems to the fore. It has been an invaluable tool to translate data, findings, or descriptions into a narrative that is grounded in the realities of those who are part of a research process. It has allowed those who are "the researched" in a process to gain a voice and reclaim their own stories. It poses answers to big questions about academic knowledge: who the knowledge is for and who, outside academia, can access the knowledge.

6.2 Background: The power of writing – a Cape Flats' perspective

Brenda Fassie hails from the community of Langa. She would be 57 years old if she was alive today. She rose to become a high-calibre musician whose career spanned over two decades and shaped the popular indigenous genre, Kwaito. Brenda Fassie's style and energy during performances filled stadiums in a time when many Black South Africans were held under the constraints of Apartheid. She sang about love, heartbreak, and walking away from love. "I'm no weekend special" and "My baby, *uhambe* wrong(o)" rang through many households' speakers, encouraging women to stand up for themselves. She sang these songs in a mixture of English and Xhosa, peppered with slang. This style of speaking (and dressing) would emerge from this era and shape 90s Kwaito. There is something to be said about thinking about this woman, whose songs would come to her in dreams.

She sang about resistance: not just the resistance of a Black person against the system, but a Black woman rebelling against a system which told her Black women's voices only mattered inside the home. Brenda Fassie redefined what it meant to be a Black woman in her time. She wore what she wanted and expressed her thoughts and sexuality without shame. Decades later, I transitioned into motherhood and observed so many changes in myself and my position in the world, yet her words reminded me that I can be who I am: unashamed, confident, and proud. This is a feat for many women of colour.

There is not a lot of time to worry about individuality if you come from a community like Langa, Gugulethu, Mfuleni, or Khayelitsha where food insecurity and unemployment are severe. To live here, you need people to help you. You know an occasional knock on a neighbour's door may yield enough borrowed money for bus fare to school. Aloof and hungry in class with one rand in my pocket, I wondered at how my inherited poverty threatened my potential to be the best form of myself every single day. Colonialism and patriarchy have a lot to account for if we truly consider its effects on the humans it oppressed and continues to oppress.

Let us fast forward into history to another woman who has inspired the thinking behind this chapter: Maya Angelou. From Angelou's work emerges the workings of the mind of a woman who told her story in all its complexity, trauma, and beauty. Angelou wrote the story of a young Black woman in America in the midst of the Great Depression before the civil rights movements. The focus was on the everyday: the retelling of events in her life in connection to the lives of those around her and in connection to her historical present. The language that Angelou used was always simple; her thoughts appeared weightless, even as she retold traumatic stories like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). In this book, she expounds upon a time in her life when she lived with her grandmother who ran a shop that sold food to cotton pickers who passed the shop on the way to and from work daily. She describes the transition from morning to evening in parallel to the diminishing mood of the passing cotton pickers who left their homes vibrant and entangled in hopeful banter and bragging in the morning and returned home in the evening exhausted and depleted. Her description of the day's end opens coldly with, "In the dying sunlight, the people dragged…". In this way, she transports her readers to the fields where labourers pick cotton as Angelou picks through the injustice and discrimination that people of colour faced during this time. Knowing I was reading was not just a fictional story, but Maya Angelou's life story always struck a painful nerve with me: like myself, she was just a young woman trying to survive, write, dance, sing, and create. I often wonder if she knew that what she was doing was an act of resistance and if she ever really had a choice of doing anything else.

> Sanelisiwe: It is important for those who will follow after me to see, hear, and witness another Black woman writing her own story and to know that my story is embedded in the stories of the lives of those around me and that I am impacted by their stories. I am impacted by my own story. And so,

> Angelou's story weaved itself into the history of its time: she wrote this story and wrote her observations and wrote to us about the internal workings of her mind. These stories will live beyond her and continue to inspire other women, including me as I write this.

6.3 Where are we at: Colonialism in research

The academic world and scientific writing manifests inequalities. The reality reads as follows:

More men than women lead research projects (McDonald et al. 2014; Acker 2006: 443; Forret/Dougherty 2004; Vehvilainen et al. 2010). The normalisation of male leadership in research projects legitimises, implicitly or explicitly, low participation of women in research (Johnston 2009; Berger et al. 2015). Consequently, more men than women publish academic work (Leslie et al. 1998; Schiebinger 2007; Schucan 2011; Duch et al. 2012; Arau´jo et al. 2017), men predominate the prestigious first-author positions (West et al. 2013), and men publish twice as many articles in accredited journals than women (Prozesky 2006). It is not surprising that more Europeans lead research projects than Africans (Diallo/Thuillier 2005) and African women published three times less often than women from Northern countries (UNESCO 2017; Khisa et al. 2019). The gender disparity in research exists against a backdrop of African scientists, in general, contributing proportionally less to global research output. Sub-Saharan Africa published only 1.4 percent of the world's total scientific papers in 2014 (Okeke et al. 2017). Women from sub-Saharan Africa constitute 30.4 percent of the continent's researchers (UNESCO 2017).

Academic journals from Europe have a higher impact factor than African journals based on JCR subject category and ISI impact factor (Orlando et al. 2005). European authors are more likely to publish than African researchers (Duermijer et al. 2018). More than 13.6 billion euros of research funds travel every year from Europe to Africa (EU 2021) and, with it, thousands of researchers.

6.4 Collaboratively writing

While continuously opening ourselves wider to sitting in the discomfort described in those statistics, leaning in, and lovingly forcing ourselves to become aware of these manifestations of inequality, we are also aware that our collaboration is caught in power relations. Nicole is leading a research project with a range of partners and staff and with substantial financial resources and decision-making power. It is coordinated from the North. Sanelisiwe is part of a partner organisation, financially dependent on the research project's funds, and personally financially tied to the project as a recipient of a master's bursary from the research collaboration. We collaborate in various work streams. One of these work streams is a co-research study on community kitchens. Community researchers from different areas of marginalised neighbourhoods in Cape Town (previously referred to as "townships" under the Apartheid regime) conduct cross-visits and document their observations, interview each other, and collect stories. Nicole supports from a distance while Sanelisiwe accompanies the community members to the site visits.

This research sprang forth from a community kitchen retreat. During this retreat, twenty women came together to kick-off the research, take a deep breath, and download the frustration that accompanies their current situations. The community kitchens of Cape Town and the women who work in them are as diverse as the neighbourhoods they serve. While some have been operational for years and are supported through community and neighbourhood initiatives or faith-based and philanthropic organisations, others opened during the COVID-19 pandemic as community-led responses to increasing food insecurity. It is estimated that there are hundreds of community kitchens in the Cape Flats. The women who run the kitchens serve a rich menu of services alongside food: domestic violence support, nutrition advice, childcare or after-school care support, and advice urging gang members to desist from violence, for example. The women see their empathetic ears as another way they help community members, many of whom want to vent their anger and frustration about the "poverty porn" they are subjected to in return for mere scraps of the cake through other support services. Their stories are both pitiful and painfully intriguing.

In community research, many of our workshops start with storytelling or a reading. This familiarises the participants with each other, creates a safer space, and grounds participants within the course environment. What is our literary safer space?

The poem read by Sanelisiwe was selected because she thought it would be able to speak to women's experiences across a range of ages. Women have feelings about their bodies, insecurities, and the shame of nakedness. Shame has a lot of power when it is not confronted; it is a silent happening inside our minds and bodies. The poem dives into one woman's experiences of womanhood and motherhood and reminds women that we are not alone in this shame, yet we would not know this unless someone is vulnerable enough to share their shame aloud:

Shame

Feeling ashamed
of my body
with its breasts that part ways
violently when I lay on my back,

that one breast goes and lays on one side
the other breast goes and lays on the other

I am ashamed
of the gleaming marks on
my bronze skin

You can see how far my
stomach must have stretched when it carried the baby

I was ashamed then
I am ashamed now
I was ashamed even
when I was too young to be ashamed
or understand shame

So shame is a taunting little thing
that grows in size and likeness
and changes with you

When your thighs take the shape of a curve
its muscles growing stronger to
withstand what weight you carry
shame has its own muscles

It grows taller with you
a second shadow that
does not disappear even when the sun
disappears from the sky

You carry your baby on your back
and somewhere your shame is attached
Perhaps a heavier load
perhaps it is why you tire so
quickly on your way to the taxi rank

I am not ashamed to admit
that I have nursed this shame
and fed it as I fed my growing child

I have groomed shame, because
letting go is a shame on its own

What the fuck is really going on

I want to write poetry
in this language I am using right now
to describe the beautiful rise of
a network of the branches of a tree
not a single leaf on this tree
dry to a kind of death,
maybe cold too

I want to highlight my fascination
at how the invisible wind lifts
dead dry leaves towards me
in the street
that my children cry in wonder
at things moving on their own

What now
with people dying in the name

of a vagina and breasts
in the name of brown skin

I don’t want to protest
or have my timeline filled
with hashtags of the names of
dead Black boys
dead Black girls
dead Black children
dead Black people

what the fuck is really going on?

I am called to bear myself open
and I hope you will find inside of me
soil that grows these
trees that grow naked in winter

I want the crooks
and corners of my veins to
house these brave birds that choose to
stay the winter

I want a smoothness to my words

I can’t even take a walk
in a forest without being afraid

I can’t even take a walk
down the street without dogs
barking at me

Because everyone is afraid

This is not about race,

of course not

but fuck poetry

fuck wordsworth

fuck these hashtags

fuck these rapists and

murderers and fuck

all this uncertainty

"-- Uhm so Sanelisiwe, to cut you short on your little speech there, how are you today?"

"Man, I don't even know"

The kitchen retreat was impactful for both of us. We can't do any research justice by just interviewing and counting the plates that leave the kitchens or asking what age group eats there or making a map of the location of the kitchens. The stories determine the depth of the research and making space for them allows the data to be interpreted by the storytellers themselves. The women community researchers also took photographs that captured significant aspects of their relationships with food and their community. As a collective, we viewed the photographs as story and interpreted the stories along a map of social networks: inside the kitchens and outside homes. The stories served as nagging reminders that conventional academia is devoid of emotions and favours easily manipulated numbers over the depth and brevity of human stories.

We understand the storytelling approach as the researchers' task of getting the story right and telling it well. This requires critical thinking around how to pursue the methodology. In our approach, we first thought about two questions, "Why is the research important and who says so? What supports are in place to scaffold the research, the researched, and the researcher." To get the story right, we need to listen carefully.

Storytelling in community organisations' work is an oral sharing of narratives, often very personal and partly embedded in the culture of the community. The storyteller is proactive in choosing whether to share the story in the first or third person and when to jump into the role of the narrator. Telling a story has an educational and an empowering component. There is a listener (or more) and there is the storyteller, all of whom embark on a process that stimulates thoughts and appeals to feelings. People who speak and tell often experience speaking as empowering, while listeners contribute by listening empathetically, connecting what is told with their own experiences and thus being understood and validated through stories.

Storytelling is, therefore, appropriately applied in the context of co-learning within community research. Different nuances and facets of different stories allow participants to create a story board of knowledge. The more stories the research process adds to such a story board, the more central some key messages become. The storyboard has two benefits; in a first step, it allows participants to describe lived experience via their different voices and, in a second step, they can look into their past and decide where the story starts, before the collected narratives come into play. In this work on community kitchens, the story started with COVID-19, the pandemic, control measures imposed by government, and how these controls impacted women and their food security. They also sparked solidarity and community-led action, such as the community kitchens (see Paganini et al. 2021). Further steps to understand what factors might influence the future help participants imagine future stories. In our case, after collecting stories, the women thought about future scenarios and clustered them in three key message categories (health, political voice, and sisterhood). From this process, action plans were developed and are currently being implemented. For example, health agents will be invited to turn kitchens into hubs for nutrition education and younger women are forming a writing club to complement a podcast series with essays developed in writing retreats. Working together to form a collective voice to gain political influence and mobilise against gender-based violence, the aim is to highlight the invisibility of care work.

In validating their shared lived experiences during research activities, participants were drawn into community and, within the safety of that positive learning community, they explored methods of community research that were enabling, respectful, and healing. For them, that meant centering community kitchens in research and questioning why research is important and to whom. Through their stories, we realised that kitchen research provides safe spaces for exploration of the hard topics that women face in their survival: carrying the burden of invisible care work, the female identity in so-called townships, and women's rights to exercise their political voices. Who says this research is important? The women!

6.5 UPhakatoni: What are we dishing?

Our joint challenge is now to translate stories into writings.

We started using collaborative writing about our research as a means to convey a message from a creative and a research perspective. Collaborative writing is, to us, more than just co-authorship of a text. It is a process from jotting notes to building paragraph upon paragraph, while swapping the leading author role. Sanelisiwe starts with a paragraph and Nicole adds the next one. This collaborative writing is inspired by a podcast series hosted by Sanelisiwe called uPhakatoni, translated from Xhosa to "What are you dishing?" In her series, Sanelisiwe invites guests to the uPhakanini community kitchen to talk about food, but also what we need to dish up to work toward a vision of community-led food systems. The conversations are collaborative explorations. In the following dialogue, we discuss whether storytelling work, as we apply it, happens in a way that models research with communities who experienced a colonial past and unsettling of colonial knowledge systems: can storytelling support respect, relevance, reciprocity, reverence, synergy, holism, and interconnectedness or does it seek to keep knowledge within contained and constrained silos?

Sanelisiwe: We are sitting at the uPhakanini kitchen. Let's talk about our research. I have always approached my academic career and my art as two spheres of expression. I attended university and complied with the criteria and structure demanded by academia as best as I could. My creative writing and other artistic passions had their own criteria which were less focused on structure and more on the quality of the final product. These developed separately for as long as I was in university. I realise now that the topics that I pursued in my art and the different modes in which it was represented was rooted in both my literature and linguistic background. This merge for me would only really take shape when I joined the co-research project in 2020 as a mapper and became engrossed in the topic of food insecurity. I was asked to write insights that would accompany the survey conducted by community researchers in my community.

This journey has led me to merge storytelling with research and it is one that I am exploring in my master's thesis. Sociolinguists see communication as verbal, text, images, or any kind of sign or meaning that comes to be understood in a context. In the rapidly evolving age of technology and media we live in, communication can be transmitted in different ways. Respecting different cultures and ways of doing comes with respecting the different ways in which information is presented. Maybe what is lacking in research is not storytelling, but acknowledging the different ways we can see knowledge.

Nicole: Our research started at a retreat in which women who run community kitchens centered their work around slow violence. We work with different forms of storytelling. The kitchen heads embark on a co-creation process to achieve their dream: repositioning community kitchens as multifaceted hubs where supports for diverse needs can be aggregated, while restoring dignity and social capital. Is the desire to amplify voices through advocacy-driven research naïve? Can research really amplify voices?

Sanelisiwe: Being in the retreat and hearing the stories of the women brought me to confront my own struggles with my personal past. I can understand my place in the world as a Black woman through my academic background, yet this does not make it easier to navigate my own oppression. I recognise the same struggles in the women who, in a broken system, take on the burden of feeding communities. That interactive dialogue at the retreat demystified the view of these women as community heroes and revealed them as exhausted women who still take it upon themselves to pour from cups that are not always sufficiently full. This part of the work is where the naivety is lost. It is important to carry this into our work approach.

In essence, yes, this research can help amplify voices. There is often tension between women's place as Black women and their sense of agency and even more so for the women at the retreat. Creating a space where dreams and obstacles to those dreams could be heard and incorporated into a vision for building these hubs and empowering those that are doing the work.

Nicole: Academic writings usually follow similar patterns, starting with an introduction, theoretical or conceptual background, methodology, findings, discussion, conclusion, and bibliography. Storytelling in academia is less common and often comes as an opening or conclusion to support the issue, its history and relevance, and changed perspectives. Can storytelling happen in a way that supports decolonisation and unsettling of colonial knowledge systems to support and respect lived experiences in a reciprocal and interconnected way? Can it acknowledge conventional, but maybe more powerful ways, of conveying research results? I remember in our last collaboration, community members surprised me by constantly pushing us to produce statistics and published studies to present to decision makers as advocacy materials; on the other hand, you, Sanelisiwe, used podcasts and factsheets to mobilise communities.

Sanelisiwe: As an artist, research is important in asking the critical questions. How is colonialism still perpetuated in the current food system? How are the women from the retreat affected by this patriarchal system? There is a reconciliation, for me, between the research data and critical thinking with the individuals who provide the data. Reading research through the lens of different modes of communications is important. This collaboration between a researcher and an artist, then, does not mean we do not see the value in conventional research. It means a mutual respect for the different ways of knowledge making, learning from experience, and seeing how things look when they are built together.

Nicole: Mutual trust and collaborative writing aren't easy. I also think that the two knowledge systems are too often too different to converge. Perhaps it is art that asks the more critical questions? Or art that is needed to break the ice on defining research needs? You often mention the reconciliation of research data. Is it enough to do research "with" instead of "about" community groups? Here I refer to the idea of co-research. We understand community-led research as a way of doing research with, rather than about communities. In co-research, participants pose research questions, design methodologies, and take part in analysis, sharing findings, and collaborative writing. Actual co-research is intense and a lot of work. And still there is a power gap.

Sanelisiwe: I have conducted two mini-research topics as a student in university and have never worked on a research project led by an international think-tank. I am aware of the obvious power differences between you and I; you are White and I am Black, you are older and more experienced in your career and I am only starting out. Vested within the work are other power differences as there are other even older, White women and more experienced colleagues (of course, there are also other older colleagues who aren't White and that has its own power dynamics as well).

Voice, opinion, and how we interact are shaped by power relations. I appreciate your willingness to listen to my crazy ideas and have observed the ways you facilitate work sessions in dialogue. Despite this, when seen through a larger historical context, our work comes with own power relations; for example, in having your approval of my texts or ideas. It is very affirming to have the confidence of a more experienced co-author who thinks you are a brilliant author and is willing to critique and support the writing. We will always face bridging the power dynamic and questioning whether or not we are bridging and where have we gone wrong in doing so?

It is important to approach the work we are doing with slow diligence. Every part of this work (the art, the data, the community insights and, in this case, the co-writing) can be seen as different parts of a functioning system that can serve as an example to others. For example, as co-authors, we discussed which of us would be listed in this chapter as the primary author and how that matters (or not) in academia and our social environments. Yet, these things did matter at the time that our current system was shaped and molded. Why did it matter at all in South Africa that a White person and a Black person could not, by law, be friends or lovers? In the same way that one example of an interracial friendship or couple sets an example and exposes how ridiculous the whole system was, as co-authors we seek to challenge power structures and norms. A mutual love for music or a type of food, perhaps, could create space for cultural sharing. Once that sharing begins, there is a breakdown of "us and them". This makes me wonder how, for example, your changed understanding of the experiences you have had in South Africa has changed your perceptions and how, if at all, this new knowledge has influenced your approach to research?

Nicole: The way we work is always marred by trouble. I often like to jump into the midst of the problem and the way we ask questions and listen to stories stirs up a lot of discussion. I think it is good, but it's also exhausting and keeps me busy. I am constantly preoccupied by the research system, its power relations, and my role within it. Whether I am in the right place, I can't say. I think that the joint research has been shaped, above all, by those who gave it its mandate. I don't think I can put into words how privileged I feel to be learning from research with community members who developed research questions, discussed ideas and concepts, written together, and, as you say, "made waves". The process we took on overcame stereotypes and involved sitting in discomfort, seeking truth about how research and colonialism are intertwined, and reconciling those differences together. I have been taught what Whiteness means and what privilege means. Decolonial research could be really useful in a world that continues to pump out White, male, Northern-dominated research projects that parachute "knowledge" into countries with no interest in receiving it. That's what we see, internally, when we try to speak the language of Northern, White, policy makers who think about policy briefs or the White women who want to save the world: we just want to be heard and focus on what we are good at: storytelling in podcasts and think pieces. Externally, community research has been ridiculed either as a project steered from abroad or as a nice chat between women who don't write serious research articles.

Sanelisiwe: I feel just as privileged to be part of a work process where I can utilise all versions of my voice. This means that I have struggled to really fit into spaces because there is a criterion to which one must always perform. My relationship with academia has been this way too: having to write to a certain structure, even when in sociolinguistics critique and question this very structure. Literature and storytelling have largely centered on telling the stories of the White male voices you speak of and has resulted in a limited interpretation of history. The book *Cry The Beloved Country* by Alan Paton (1948) follows the story of a Black pastor who travels from KwaZulu Natal to Johannesburg trying to locate his long lost son. This story, at the time of its publication, received copious praise for telling what was deemed an authentic South African story. When I read this story about a Black man as told by a White man, I could see where Paton was limited. The problem was not Paton himself as he imagined a South Africa where different races attempted to heal from a deeply painful colonial past. Perhaps if a variety of voices trying to reimagine a future were raised, there could be more complex characters and stories told. This is what we are trying to do, I believe: create room for more voices and to hear those voices with respect, not just in storytelling, but in research too.

6.6 Conclusion

Writing together, especially across social and cultural boundaries is not easy. To write at eye level and shape the text equally, we suggest starting with a story or a poem that helps us all understand the core message of the text. Most people remember stories, but not numbers and percentages. One of these stories is the story Brenda Fassie which shows us that no matter what anyone says, you must stay true to yourself. She came from Sanelisiwe's community, she sang about resistance, and gave people hope during a time of oppression. We still live during a time of oppression and stories help us explore injustice and connect to and disrupt conventional logic through unexpected style.

In other words, decolonial writing through sharing of stories detaches the neutrality of conventional, conceptually framed, evidence-based research by contextualising the findings not through a framework, but through a story. The story gives the text and the research personality and a voice. This brings another vulnerability to the fore: participants in our research project expressed fear that their information was being captured in mere numbers, naked statistics, or bar charts. They didn't want to be seen as statistics, but as stories. Sharing a story of grief and oppression make us, however, more vulnerable. However, there is strength in vulnerability. We have not overcome the uncomfortable situation caused by power relations, though we do our best to depersonalise it.

Co-writing among oppressed communities, women, people of colour, the queer community, and other members of "the researched" can create transformative agency for knowledge by steering and shaping the narrative of the research. Writing about lived experience, as a scientist who is from a community, turns contestations and contradictions of conventional methods into intellectual resistance and is a further step toward inclusion in a growing network of African scientists and African women rewriting Africa. Collaborative writing is not only a process of exchanging ideas, but of co-creating text and a body of written knowledge that follows a process of intellectual musings, conversation, reflection, and appreciation of difference.

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