

Review

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An Infinite Longing for Love: A Collection of Poetry. Lisa Combrinck, Skotaville Media Publications, Pretoria, 2005.

These Hands: Poems. Makhosazana Xaba, Timbila Poetry Project, Elim Hospital, Limpopo Province, 2005.



Makhosazana Xaba's and Lisa Combrinck's collections of poetry are welcome additions to the body of creative work by black African women writers. In Combrinck's case, a collection is long overdue – she is a seasoned performer whose exquisite poems have been published in respected journals for more than two decades. Xaba is a new light on the South African literary scene – having emerged as a writer relatively late in life, she is now an active participant in a writing group for women and is currently completing an MA in Creative Writing. There is therefore every hope that we will see more of her work, and that it will grow still more polished.

In an era in which commercial publishers rarely front the work of black women unless they are celebrities, it is heartening to see these authors circumventing the process by opting for self-publishing, an increasingly respectable route to follow, and one that allows for creative autonomy. Nevertheless, it does also sometimes leave writers without access to quality editing and mentoring. If there is any quibble about these two powerful and poignant collections, it is that judicious editorial intervention could have provided support with the selection and ordering of poems.

These are also both collections of love poetry. There is love for parents (Xaba's bitter-sweet love for her apartheid-damaged, drunken father); there is love for children (Xaba writes for her ten-year-old daughter, and Combrinck for her firstborn son); there is love for country and comrades in struggle (Xaba refers to "the Lusaka that is now part of our history" (17), and Combrinck (3) to "casspirs [police tanks] patrolling, / the mourners going home"); and there is the love of a woman for a man, and the love of a woman for a woman. All of these forms of love are presented from the perspective of women writers for whom erotic experience and human life are inseparable. This perspective is nothing short of revolutionary, and this review will demonstrate why.

Firstly, the insistence on unity between erotic experience and all aspects of human life challenges Calvinist associations of sexual pleasure with sin and fear of punishment.

Secondly, it highlights the great paucity of erotic poetry by and for women in the African literary canon in general (a situation that does not correspond to the traditional oral productions of African societies).

Thirdly, one understands its revolutionary nature when considering whether to prescribe these two volumes for an undergraduate class on gender issues in African literature. How is one to deal with words like “vagina” and “penis” in the classroom? Xaba, in her title poem, says that her hands know “the depth of vaginas” (11) and Combrinck says of the penis that “you can stroke it, rub it or even bend it” (49). And what of the lovemaking itself? It is, of course, acceptable to read male-authored paeans to women’s bodies and heterosexual lovemaking aloud in class, such as this anonymous male-oriented one from Ethiopia:

You lime of the forest, honey among the rocks,
Lemon of the cloister, grape in the savannah.
You mistress of my body (Soyinka, 1975: 274).

Compare this with Combrinck:

My love...
put your finger deep within me
return to the source
and confirm your route (4)

or Xaba:

as I watch the sun set,
you rise ever so slowly behind its rays
to be my sun in the night... (39).

But it is quite another matter to explicate the imagery contained in these poems, to set practical criticism exercises and tests on them, and mark students’ scripts and return them with comments in the margin. Xaba’s poems are especially challenging in this regard. Consider how this black Zulu woman’s canvassing of a woman’s love for another woman disrupts the persistence, for example, of the image of African motherhood that has flourished ever since the Négritude Movement. But these are surely challenges which we must embrace.

Fourthly, it is striking that both Xaba and Combrinck use the metaphor of hands in order to underline the unity between erotic experience and life. For example, the hands in Xaba’s title poem have known not only pus, faeces, mucus, guns, grenades and deep vaginas providing passage for “minute, minute-old



clenched fists”, but they have also “made love / producing vibrations / from receiving lovers” (11). Similarly, Combrinck offers her lover her scarred, callused hands, that have not only peeled, cooked, boiled, and “shaken with fear in the night of death”, but have also run down his face, “softly, slowly, very deliberately”, whispering her love “like fish mouths” and “ululating” her desires (36).

This insistence on the unity of daily life, literally embodied in hands, and erotic experience, allows Combrinck to speak simultaneously and self-evidently about the fight for the rights of people to have love, and their right to have land, thus challenging, as does Xaba, the sequential, “first things first” approach of many African nationalists long after Kwame Nkrumah made the well-known statement, “Seek ye first the political kingdom and all the rest shall be added unto you”.

Yet African economies remain as divorced from the political kingdom as ever, and there is no reason to believe that the open expression of women’s erotic experience will be welcomed in this kingdom. On the contrary, Xaba, in “The Silence of a Lifetime” focuses on a backlash of a particularly pernicious kind, stretching throughout a woman’s life, from the time that she is seven years old until she is a very old woman. If we list the last lines of the stanzas that make up this poem, the familiar contours of repression and sexual violence become visible: “Don’t ever tell anyone”, “Stop thinking you’re so smart”, “Prove that you love me”, “You are my wife aren’t you?”, “So who’s the boss now?”, “No one else wants an old rag like you” (18-20). Any kind of revolution invites reaction from those who feel that it endangers their power.

Fifthly, the unity between erotic experience and life allows Xaba and Combrinck to interweave images of the body with the everyday commonalities of women’s lives, accomplishing, as a result, a type of transformation that affects the women and the work that they do. Xaba, for example, says that her lover’s eyes “clasp themselves onto my clothing like a dressmaker’s safety pins” (24). Here we see not only the two lovers, desiring each other across a table, but the dressmaker, plying her skilled trade, possibly for small returns, but lit up nevertheless by association with the desire of the lovers. Combrinck uses a similar strategy in the poem called “Masturbation”, but in relation to daily habits of health and refreshment. She says, after having described masturbation as a “climber reaching the summit alone”, that it is:

... an addiction

best left untreated.

A healthy life-long preoccupation like exercise or taking a bath (48).



Women's body processes, associated sometimes with danger or disgust or both, become both commonplace and self-evident when woven into erotic experience. In the poem "Every act of sex", Combrinck claims that every time a man leaves her, she "finds another stretchmark" (52), as though she had been pregnant with him. And in "Menstruating at full moon," she pays tribute to all of us whose periods have been associated with taboos, pollution, witchcraft and evil. As we ought to do in imitation,

The full moon rises above the watermark,
taking her solitary, solid shape up in the sky ...
She is triumphant once more,
her monthly hunger-lust for blood duly satisfied (47).

Sixthly, if one undertakes to "sing openly and honestly about sexual love", then one must, as a self-respecting and responsible person, be at the same time also concerned with sexually transmitted diseases. "Diseases of the blood", Combrinck calls them (15) – she refers to herpes, blisters, warts, discharge, syphilis, blocked tubes, "wombs that are tombs", penises "as lethal as nuclear warheads", lesions, tears, poison. She does not mention HIV/AIDS specifically, but encompasses it in the last two lines of this poem:

Death is less than a stone's throw,
merely a sperm-flow away (15).

We note here the equation of womb with tomb, emphasised by assonance. Does this signal the end of the revolution of the union of erotic experience and life? Not at all. The answer to this dilemma is contained in two poems in which Combrinck enters into a dialogue with Dambudzo Marechera,¹ where she clarifies her own motivation as poet in terms of this indivisible link between erotic experience and life. She has already said in "Concerning the subject matter of this poetry" that she is "weary of weaving words / into another torn, tattered, tapestry of the times / we live in" (15), and she says again in "Love song for Dambudzo Marechera" that she is sick of the "ritual suicides," with "human blood bursting from our pens" (65). Here she equates the relentless focus on human misery with the "diseased redness / of our raped thighs" (65). Elsewhere, the metaphor is stated in terms of "burning butt-ends" (53), (which hint not only at cafés, but also torture), "broken glass", "random bullets", and "lacerations that cut and scythe / this scrap heap that is life" (53). She sees Marechera's "lines" (of words, that is) as "lifelines" indeed, but lifelines that can be "curved / into an ominous noose" (53). She offers him a way out that works for her, and which she calls "the outstretched hand" (61), but which stands for a tender moment of "consummated desire":



There is much to be done [she says to Marechera]:

Let me pick up
 your spoors of words
 trace the trail of your blood
 touch your dreads
 with wonder and with love
 weave my hands through your hair
 finger the flesh wounds on your face
 kiss your parched lips
 sooth your scalded hands.
 Let me hold you
 and with these words
 give myself to you (65).

Xaba, too, in her poem “Words,” claims that whenever the pulse of her existence and resistance threatens to succumb to the misery of life, words transmit to her an orgasmic “drumroll of deliverance” (21).

Finally, Combrinck’s epilogue and prologue, though written in prose, are themselves long lyrical outpourings that provide an overall context for the interpretation not only of her love poems, but Xaba’s too. She makes the point that escape from the self into something larger is encapsulated in the sex act itself, rather than in non-stop copulation. The erotic experience itself becomes a profound symbol for “genesis” (89), “metamorphosis” (90), “changes beyond reason” (90). Combrinck and Xaba invert Leda-and-the-Swan-type myths, in which the gods descend from the mountain-tops and mate with human women. In their erotic poetry of love and life, it is the other way round. In their creative works, transformation relies on women flying to the heavens and consorting with the gods.

References

Soyinka, Wole. ed. 1975. *Poems of Black Africa*. London: Heinemann.

Footnote

- 1 Dambuzo Marechera was a brilliant Zimbabwean poet whose rebellious and iconoclastic work was seized upon by an entire generation. He died of AIDS in 1987.

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